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This project theorizes the Black God trope as a rhetorical strategy used by many African-American rhetors across the history of African-American letters. The Black God trope is a linguistic, imagistic, and embodied rendering of religious concepts, such as God is Black, to create associations of meaning that foreground racial uplift. The Black God trope is a rhetorically constituted phenomenon created through resistance strategies that target African-American audience members, but are also accessed by anyone culturally rooted in the terms of the conversation. First, I demonstrate how Black rhetors writing about a Black God creates a language system that reflects African-Americans' shifting subjectivity within the American experience. Offering examples from Ethiopianism to rap music, I focus on the Black God trope from the 1950s to the 1990s. Across these examples, I provide evidence of linguistic, imagistic, and embodied rhetorical resistance to white western patriarchy. Finally, I examine the Black God trope as a gendered critique of white and Black western patriarchy to demonstrate how an ideology like womanism is voiced by authors using the Black God trope as a means of public address. This work is the beginning of a rhetorical history that understands a Black God and Black Nationalist religious rhetoric as central to conducting scholarship on the African-American experience. The project offers a pathway to new and creative teaching and research methods that engage diversity and multivocality.

THE BLACK GOD TROPE: TOWARD A HISTORY OF BLACK NATIONALIST
RELIGIOUS RHETORIC

by

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This is for my mom, Kathleen Collins (1946-2016).

APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER	
I. THE BLACK GOD TROPE AND ENTHYMEMATIC BLACKNESS	1
II. A MESSAGE TO THE BLACKMAN IN AMERICA: ELIJAH MUHAMMAD’S INFLUENTIAL RELIGIOUS RHETORIC.....	37
III. CLARENCE 13X’S BLACK GOD ETHOS AND THE RHETORICAL CHALLENGE OF THE FIVE PERCENT	70
IV. THE BLACK GOD TROPE IN THE NOVEL: A MESSAGE FROM THE BLACK WOMAN IN AMERICA	113
V. ALICE WALKER’S WOMANIST BLACK GOD TROPE AND <i>THE COLOR PURPLE</i>	147
VI. THE BLACK GOD TROPE AS BLACK NATIONALIST RELIGIOUS RHETORIC	173
BIBLIOGRAPHY	189

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1. "Soapbox Orator"	3
Figure 2. "Malcolm Teaching"	76
Figure 3. "Deconstructing 'Negro'"	76
Figure 4. "Black Christ"	112

CHAPTER I

THE BLACK GOD TROPE AND ENTHYMEMATIC BLACKNESS

In 1952, Ralph Ellison and photo journalist, Gordon Parks, traveled to Harlem to visually capture the cultural elements of urban Black life as they appear within the pages of Ellison's magisterial novel *Invisible Man*. The photos were to appear in a *Time* magazine article on the novel, and the premise of the pictures was that they would give white readers a better understanding of the Harlem about which Ellison so skillfully wrote. The pictures were to be used as a way of speaking about the Blackness Ellison writes about. One group of pictures that did not make the final article, but are integral to understanding the Black urban space Ellison writes about, is a set of three pictures, all focused on an unnamed Soapbox Orator. The preacher, it can be assumed, symbolizes Ras the Exhorter, the Jamaican activist who plays the foil to Ellison's protagonist. An analog or not, what is important about the street preacher photos is a close-up picture of the speaker holding up a newspaper. The image on the newspaper is a full-page picture of Jesus, depicted as an African-American (see figure 1). The photo is telling for two related reasons. The first is that the picture of Jesus with African facial features demonstrates the commonality of the image within the African-American community, even before the Black Power movement. The second is that the picture is being held by a street

preacher exhorting Black pride to African-Americans. This demonstrates that Black Nationalist religious movements communicated their ideologies orally, visually, and textually as a common rhetorical practice well before the 1960's. Taken together, these two clues support my claim that religious images have been used by African-Americans as a means of producing Black Nationalist rhetoric since slavery.

Black people's conversations about God and/or religion are usually also conversations about the material aims of African-American people as a social-political bloc. This discourse, when found in a Black Nationalist rhetorical context, most often evokes a message that runs explicitly counter-culture to the white western aesthetic that undergirds the cultural logic of white American nationalism.¹ An examination of how Black Nationalism operates as rhetoric in African-American writing demonstrates that language about God and/or religion is often a resistance strategy that tells a deeper story of African-American history and the discursive logic that history still attempts to redress. Blackness and religious rhetoric act not only as *logos* (the logic of a communication act), but just importantly as *ethos* (the material artifact and representation of a communication act), and *pathos* (the emotional appeal of a persuasive act to a presumed audience).² This examination of how several writers have used God's Blackness as a refracted image of the human self demonstrates shifts within the African-American worldview about the relationship of self to society. For instance, Alice Walker's protagonist Celie in *The*

¹ For a discussion of the racial logic undergirding American nationalism, see Mills 1-8.

² The use of *ethos* in this fashion denotes audio, visual, and written communication. This use is not entirely unique to this study, but it should be noted that this diversion from more conventional uses of the term is intentional. A more pointed explanation of *ethos* appears in the definitions section of this chapter.

Color Purple echoes her sentiments about the centrality of personal experience over and against institutionalized experiences like the African-American church. In addition, the rhetoric of these various Black worldviews, as materially constructed, express how the cultural practice of writing God is a modality for discursive resistance.

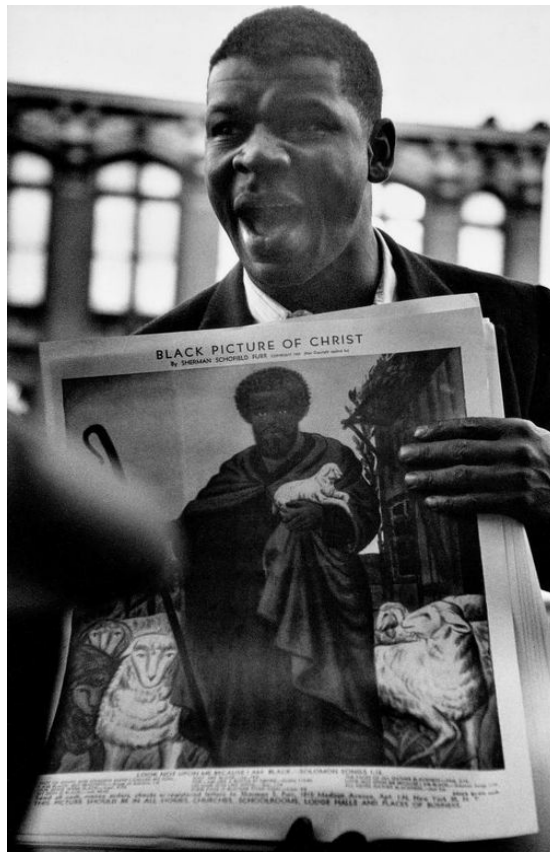


Figure 1. “Soapbox Orator”

Enthymematic Blackness

In this study, Blackness is a rhetorically constituted phenomenon created through rhetorical strategies that target African-American audience members but are also accessed by anyone culturally rooted in the terms of the conversation. These strategies

are mapped out by examining the language rhetors use to communicate with their presumed audience. Blackness is conceptualized here as a field that allows rhetors and their African-American audiences to connect in discursive formations. Enthymematic discourse is the term I use to describe the way this type of Black Nationalism at times forms a rhetoric in the texts studied. Enthymematic discourse is characterized here following a modernist concept of enthymeme as an active process within discourse, meaning that beyond merely being a syllogism or a truncated form of speech, enthymeme is a dynamic process that requires a shared cultural understanding between the rhetor and audience, of the relationship between the word as a signified symbol, and its multiple possible meanings culturally (Conley 169). The Black God trope works as enthymeme because it helps guide audience members to the multiple meanings any word or phrase can take on. Enthymeme thought of in this regard is “a stylistically intensified argumentative turn that serves not only to draw conclusions but also, and decisively, to foreground a stance and motivate identification with that stance” (J. Walker 55). This dissertation takes a decidedly sophistic approach to enthymeme as an analytical tool, seeing it as demonstrative of “a ‘web’ or network of emotively significant ideas and liaisons that may or may not appear as a structure of value laden oppositions” (55). The way an utterance is communicated is a rhetorical choice of great import, as much as the subject matter being covered by the communication. In this dissertation, the term enthymematic discourse denotes how rhetors ground their selection of surface topoi in common references to everyday events, actions, feelings, in their Black audience’s premises as a vital component of the persuasion process. It is a participatory rhetorical

view of communication. Surface signifiers (articulated language) are a matter of choice, context, inflection, and arrangement and behave as enthymemes signifying deeper cultural meaning as a rhetoric within a text (Phillipson 40). For instance, saying “ABC’s” is an enthymematic expression that refers to the English alphabet. Saying “ABCs” allows the rhetor to forego saying the entire alphabet with letters or explicitly stating “the English alphabet.” For the hearers or readers, the term is rooted in their experiences of the concept and very often the childhood nursery rhyme, “The ABCs Song.” In fact, “The ABCs Song” is an enthymematic discourse itself, in that it uses the simple structural format of a children’s song to deliver a complex cultural message not intelligible by examining only a literal interpretation of what is said – namely, basic English literacy. What is important about “The ABCs Song” is not just what is said, but more so, the didactic function that singing the song performs for the speaker and the audience.

Similarly, Blackness as a rhetorical construct and as an enthymematic discourse evades an essentialist argument about what is and what is not *Black* rhetoric by detaching racial affiliation and identity from biological and/geographical orderings of humanity. The term Blackness operates as enthymematic discourse by tapping into the premises of the audiences’ differing personal, cultural, and social understandings and meanings of the term without having to establish a specific meaning for the entire audience. Blackness and Black Nationalism operate as rhetorical constructs, making themselves visible and invisible in writing, shedding light on positionality and agency within white hegemony. Blackness as it is conceived in this dissertation, functions as a discourse that transforms, shifts, and manifests differently in each phase of the Black experience. The 1952 photo of

Jesus as African-American illustrates and demonstrates Blackness in the form of a Black God trope. This type of trope as it is employed across time and in different realms and phases of the Black experience provides a concrete example of Blackness as an identifiable discourse that manifests differently in these various social contexts. By focusing on the Black God trope, relationships and webs of meaning arise in Christian and non-Christian texts and situations. Whether inflected in Standard American English or vernacular idioms, the rhetoric needs interpreting to understand its function as an ideological message symbolically conveyed as the Black God trope. The various written constructions of what I call the Black God trope illustrate how Black rhetoric exerts influence over the everyday lives of African-Americans. The rhetors examined across this dissertation are simultaneously constructing written products and are products of that rhetoric. The ideological focus of the writing choices each rhetor makes demonstrates the influences of intersecting rhetorics, those that came before it and appear alongside it. Examining the discursive patterns of Black Nationalism contained in writing highlights the ways that Black rhetoric is normative by naturalizing African-American communication patterns as practical survival strategies. This move displaces whites from a universal stance which tends to reinforce “violently psychopathic racial behavior.”³ Questions that this dissertation addresses are: What are the exigencies for a rhetor who uses the Black God trope to engage an audience? What cultural values are implicit in the rhetorical situation that makes the Black God trope an appropriate rhetorical strategy? And, how does the way a writer (originator of the message) writes to the audience (the

³ See Bobby Wright, especially chapter 1, for whiteness and the ‘racialized subject’ as the product of a collective psychopathology.

receiver of a message) expose the values hidden within the discourse?

A prevailing problem within the study of Black Nationalist rhetoric is the difficulty of mapping out exactly how the word constructs Black identity, and conversely, how Black identity shapes the written and/or spoken word. This dissertation elaborates on the scholarship surrounding this problem by demonstrating the rhetorical connection between disparate articulations of Black Nationalism that use tropological language about God and other religious figures to persuade their intended audience. In this dissertation, James Cone's Black Liberation Theology movement and Alice Walker's Womanist literary movement stand alongside Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and Sutton Griggs's Collective Efficiency as examples of discourse that use tropological language about a Black God as a trope to tell their story. My claim is that there is a continuity across African-American writings that employ the rhetorical strategy of manipulating language about a Black God to make a broader cultural claim, similar in function to the method of persuasion promoted by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. These writings are a part of a field of discourse that contain within them the rhetorical markings of a Black worldview that appears in African-American literature long before the rise of Black Power in the 1960's. Moreover, they demonstrate how rhetors use language about God, Jesus, and other Biblical figures to echo deeper cultural ideas about race as those cultural ideas shift throughout African-American history.

The Black God trope as enthymematic discourse works from the understanding that language use has a surface structure and a deep structure. Even in written form, every utterance contains multiple meanings outside its literal signification. In "Researching and

Theorizing Multilingual Texts,” Mark Sebba reminds us that although most research on code-switching has focused on spontaneous verbal speech, there is a growing body of research on multilingualism, “code-mixing, code-shifting, language alteration or language interaction” within written discourse (1). This dissertation adds to this intellectual tradition by focusing vernacular coding beyond dialect or phonetic mimicry. The writers examined create meaning on a surface level of their writing which influences, but does not determine, how meaning on a deeper level is interpreted by its audience. They select specific language to evoke dual, and even multiple, meanings for each utterance. Every rhetor in this study does not consider themselves a Black Nationalist, but they all tap into Black Nationalist religious rhetoric about God to state their rhetorical position. This dissertation’s argument addresses three persistent social problems that plague the understanding of the sophisticated use of religion as language by African-Americans who publicly express a demand for social justice in America:

1. A chauvinistic misapprehension of African-American intelligence, history, language use practices, and voice; both within the public and private spheres of human activity; that unnecessarily privileges Eurocentric philosophy, art, religion, intellect, and discursive practices as morally and aesthetic superior to all other forms of human discourse.
2. A failure by Americans of all races and ethnicities – including many African-Americans – to understand African-American language users on their own terms, which is another form of white hegemony.

3. A well-documented language barrier between African-American communicators and the inherently racist world they inhabit on all levels of experience.

This study offers a nuanced understanding of how rhetoric functions within the African-American community, thereby making these important historical discourses intelligible to out-group readers and listeners.⁴ Thus, it broadens the disciplinary scholarship on racial and ethnic rhetorics and the ways they manufacture meaning within a discreet, historically marginalized, discursive formation that fluidly switches between Standard American English and its own idiomatic conventions.

I argue that Black Nationalist rhetors used the Black God Trope to help disseminate African-America's "Black" identity, and in the process created a pro-Black ethos that runs counter to white racism and the social mythos of America that was its result. In addition to "enthymeme," the terms "myth," "mythos," "rhetoric," "trope," "telos," "ethos," and "worldview" are also critical to this study. "Myth" is a term used quite frequently in this dissertation and as used refers to stories that may be false, or even intentionally fictional, yet they still point to deeper human and social truths, often by design. An understanding of myth as a living tale that strengthens a community of communicators is more useful than a definition of the term that frames myth as a pejorative. "Myth" should not be read here as a reduction of the complexity of beliefs covered in this dissertation, an equating of dissimilar terms, or a disbelief in the efficacy of story to a community of adherents. Quite the opposite is true; myth is understood here

⁴ In addition, it improves scholars' ability to teach critical thinking skills in rhetoric and composition, using African-American examples.

as a building block of community language. Mythos, as used here, is a related term in that myths, over time, become canonical in part through extra-canonical stories that reinforce the canonical text and ultimately become part of the public memory associated with the original text. The common Christian understanding of hell as a place underneath the earth that is a fiery pit is an example of this. This extra-canonical text became just as much a part of the myth as the original text as the text itself. Therefore, it is a part of the larger world of the myth, or its mythos. “Rhetoric” here is employed to mean *word use* as well as persuasive speech. In this dissertation, rhetors are using their words consciously to build an understanding of the world. The term rhetoric is often used interchangeably with discourse, which may prove problematic for some. Discourse is used to describe the process of communicating. Rhetoric, in this African-American context, is a world-building process within which discourse happens. It is constitutive. Black rhetoric has constructed Black life, and in fact, encapsulates it. “Trope” is used here to isolate the use of the figure of God or other religious concepts, either as an image, theme, or motif in the rhetoric of African-American communicators. “Telos” denotes the ultimate aims or object of an action, in this case, most often, the ultimate aim of God’s movement in the world or the ultimate purpose of human life and activity. This dissertation claims that the use of God as a trope in a Black Nationalist religious rhetoric has helped build what is termed the “Black” worldview. The Black God trope has its roots in the Black church, but it extends far beyond traditional Christian theological formulas of divine and human authority.

Soul Speech: Black People as a Discursive Formation

In a material way African-Americans operate as a discreet discursive formation in the United States, even in the present ostensibly post-racial society. A discursive formation is a “group of verbal performances” that form a discourse in which different examples share similar “patterns perspectives, concepts, or themes” (Foucault 115). Black people, in this sense, are a discursive formation because of their shared experience of slavery, segregation and marginalization in the United States. People converse with those they are around and with those who understand them. Blackness as a “group of verbal performances” analyzes different examples of Black writers writing to a presumably Black audience to demonstrate how these authors share similar “patterns perspectives, concepts, or themes” when crafting their rhetoric.

David Gordon Nielson coined the term “black ethos” to describe the material culture produced by Black discursive formations. The term describes the result of the cyclical relationship between African-Americans’ cultural worldview and language as the primary vehicle for producing a material culture (3). Nielson recognizes that beyond slavery, torture, and institutionalized racism, a discourse developed among Africans in America holds the ‘race’ together as a unified group. This discourse is the repository of a culture that stands in direct opposition to white Western normativity because it was made to be an in-group discourse, even when it is spoken outside its original community. Although “Black Power” was a culminating moment within this discursive movement of the African-American experience, the rhetorical roots of Black Power are in its appropriation of God as a grounding metaphor for nationalism. The appropriation of God

as a grounding metaphor is rooted in what Matthew Johnson characterizes as the human need to “fit life and reality into categories that render experience existentially manageable.” It is an “innate response to reality” that provides us with “a kind of ontological security” (M. Johnson, *Tragic Vision*, 13-15). Robert Alexander Young’s *Ethiopian Manifesto*, published in 1829, for example, warns that a Black Messiah is being raised to avenge African-American slavery:

Take warning, again we say, for of a surety from this, God will give you signs to know, in his decrees he regards the fallen state of the sons of men ... Of the degraded of this earth, shall be exalted, one who shall draw from thee, as though gifted of power divine, all attachment and regard of thy slave towards thee. Death shall he prefer to a continuance of his race:-being doomed to thy vile servitude ... (Young 87)

Young’s Black Messiah is a trope that he employs to echo a Black Nationalist rendering of Psalms 68:1. In this rendering the theological concept of redemptive suffering is coupled with the biblical verse to create a narrative that rationalizes the African Diaspora after the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The narrative places the African-American experience on a trajectory that constructs it in direct opposition to white nationalism and western imperialism. The triumphant end of the narrative is fulfilled by African-Americans overthrowing white oppression and saving the darker peoples of the world. The Black Messiah trope the manifesto employs is a means of communication and agency for the moment to which it is written. It must be remembered, as an African-American, Young had no voice in politics or the court in 1829. This strategy gets repeated by authors in later unrelated works for many of the same reasons Young chooses to employ tropological language as a form of resistance. Namely, freely expressing the complex

ideological concerns of African-Americans within the existential moment to which the author is writing.

In “Language of the Soul,” Claude Brown argues for African Americans’ English use as a “Black Soul Aesthetic” which is analogous to the “black ethos” proposed by Nielson. For Brown, “Soul is manifested in a variety of objects...but its general characteristics tend to be more subjective than objective” and has “more to do with style than with substance” (230). The “Soul” English that African-Americans speak, although heavily borrowed from its standard counter-part, is a unique manifestation of the Black experience in America (233). Implicit in this statement is the confluence of Blackness as an ontological category and Soul as its aesthetic expressed or *ethos*. To put it in Geertzian terms, the Black worldview is expressed as the Black ethos within American English. Brown’s view of language is that it is symbolically fluid and a building block of Black identity formation and social cohesion. He historicizes the “multiplicity of nuances” English words and phrases tend to take on “when used by soul people” (232), explaining:

Before the Civil War there were numerous restrictions placed on the speech of slaves...Consequently, Negro slaves were compelled to create a semi-clandestine vernacular in the same way that the criminal underworld has historically created words to confound law enforcement agents... (233)

The “semi-clandestine vernacular” of Blacks was most often a piecemeal tapestry of English words and expressions with multiple contextual and inverted meanings (233), yet this method of speaking was one way for many African-Americans to communicate with one another in the presence of whites, “soul” to “soul,” without being treated harshly for being subversive. The act itself was subversive during slavery, and its power of

subversion is precisely why the practice still happens in certain expressions of African-American literature and culture today.⁵ Brown recognizes that Black English usage forms often occupy a middle ground between the standard and informal usage of words accepted by the general public. But his false binary between Soul speech and Standard English is not necessary to define his new term. English is in a constant state of flux. American English, especially, is always adding new words and meanings to its vocabulary for social, scientific, artistic, and cultural reasons. Words have fluidity, and transfer culture across racialized cultural boundaries.

The Black God Trope and Black Nationalist Religious Rhetoric

God's relationship to Blackness is a means of discussing African-Americans' world. God's Blackness as a rhetorical trope operates as a Burkean "terministic screen" in the work of several African-American authors. Kenneth Burke describes a "terministic screen" as a contrived language system that reveals an individual's perception and symbolic action in the world, adding that it displays a careful selection, reflection, and deflection of reality when examined through a language user's word-choice (*Language as Symbolic Action* 44-45). In this study, God's Blackness is a terministic screen that operates to help form Black identity. The trope is a fusion of myth, symbol, language, and action. The texts I focus on carry within them an intense intertextual conversation with Black Nationalist religious rhetoric, using God and other Biblical figures as a trope to do so. The Black God trope develops out of the Black

⁵ Gates's *signifying* touches on the subject, but the practice is much broader than his use of the term implies.

Christian church and its preaching practices, which are an outgrowth of West African oral traditions (Karenga 8-9). The Black God trope demonstrates language in action, a careful selection of rhetorical topoi constructed to create several particularly liberal anti-white racist counter-narratives. The Black Nationalist religious rhetoric in the 18th Century Black church movement and the subsequent 19th Century Ethiopianist movement are the genesis of the Black God trope and its rhetoric of resistance to white supremacy. Although the focus of this study lies squarely in the late 20th century, it is the African Methodist church movements and Black Freemasonry movements that start the surge to create African-American group identity via public discourse (Wilmore, et al. xiii). It is not until Young self-publishes the *Ethiopian Manifesto* in 1829, however, that explicit Black Nationalist statements using the Black God trope emerge within public discourse.

As a subset of Black Nationalist rhetorics, Black Nationalist religious rhetoric denotes the religious rhetoric that is used in service of Black Nationalism (lower and upper case). Black Nationalist religious rhetoric is also a terministic screen that characterizes the symbol-making world of African-Americans. Words like “God” and “Jesus” are *super-images* particularly meaningful for African-American communicators because they are used as a sort of “meta-language” that conjures images and ideas that induce support of a pro-Black worldview. Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, I argue that worldview is the cognitive analog of material ethos, the two maintaining a cyclical relationship that influences social behavior using symbol systems, like religion, writing, and language to connect surface performance to deeper cultural meaning (250).

Thus, African-American writers, as public agents, provide a surrogate voice for a distinct – yet porous – discursive formation constantly in the process of creating itself through multiple modes of negotiated rhetorical practice. This requires the paired use of the terms “ethos” and “worldview” in this study. The terms denote culture’s role in the ordering and activity of American intellectual, social, political, and economic life. A dynamic relationship exists between “ethos” and “worldview” that shows that religion, language, writing, and culture are symbol systems that humans use to create experience. To that extent, in enthymematic discourse, symbol systems are the information sources that give one’s life “shape, direction, particularity, and point to an ongoing flow of activity” (Geertz 250). Employing the Black God trope as it manifests differently across genres, I demonstrate how a Black worldview emerges through the Black ethos of certain writers and their works and is, in turn, a reflection of the worldview that created such an ethos.

Approaching Black Nationalist religious rhetoric in this manner differentiates the rhetoric of Black Nationalism from the ideology of Black Nationalism without losing sight of the fact that Black Nationalism is an ideology (more proper, many ideologies). My study focuses on how language about God functions within this particular discursive field to influence human motives and human relations. In this way, the Black God trope functions not just as a “reflection of reality” (in this case, a socio-political ideological stance) it is also a “selection and deflection of reality,” or re-working of it – a seizing of voice and agency (Burke, *Language As Symbolic Action*, 45). Stated differently, the Black God trope offers communicators the linguistic opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct history, myth, and reality as a means for expressing agency and voice.

Black Church Lore as Rhetorical Performance

Throughout history, African-Americans have used the Bible to speak to their experience, as well as speak of it. African-American authors routinely link the image of God, Jesus, Moses, and other Biblical characters together with the image of Black people in contemporary America. Oftentimes, this synthesis was achieved by means of folklore tales based on church myth. Black church folklore was both sacred and secular, meaning it was told inside and outside of traditional Christian church settings, by preachers and laity alike. African-Americans used folklore to tell one another stories about their religion and their relationship to the world. One of the goals of this church folklore was to create a counter-theology, in hopes that new myths could bring the African-American experience closer to the rhetoric of salvation and liberty in the Protestant Christian message. Another goal was to inspire group unity, and cultural resistance to violent white supremacy (Wilmore et al 120-121). This was done in direct response to notions of inferiority reinforced, linguistically and materially, into the collective African-American psyche by whites who sought to justify their sole rule of the United States with inferiority myths like the “Curse of Ham.” Church myths used to racist ends, like the “Curse of Ham,” have had tragic and lasting material effects on the African-American community. The idea of a Black God and a Black Jesus are only two examples of counter-folklore myths that seek to refute theories of Black inferiority. But they are also good examples of Black church lore at work. In this case, the work being done by Black folklore is the creation of

alternative visions of reality – a key survival practice African-Americans learned over time as a coping strategy.⁶

The “Curse of Ham” (also called the “Curse of Canaan”) refers to an Old Testament story in which Noah, Ham's father, places a curse upon Ham's son Canaan, after Ham sees his father's drunken nakedness. It is related in the Book of Genesis 9:20-27. Some Biblical scholars see the “Curse of Canaan” story as an early Hebrew rationalization for Israel's conquest and enslavement of the Canaanites, who were presumed to descend from Canaan. But the “Curse of Ham” has also been used by white Americans and others to justify racism and the enslavement of people of Black African ancestry, whom they believed to be descendants of Ham. This racist theory was widely accepted lore between the 18th-20th centuries and contributed to an inferior status and self-perception in many ways (Goldenberg 147). The negative psychological effects of this did not go unnoticed by Blacks. This is evident when we examine the rhetoric of this excerpt from “How We Became Black” from Zora Neal Hurston's *Mules and Men*:

Long before they got thru makin' the Atlantic and haulin' de rocks for de mountains, God was makin' up de people. Be he didn't finish em all at one time. Ah'm compelled to say dat some folks is walkin' round dis town right now ain't finished yet and never will be.

Well, He give out eyes one day. All de nation come up and got they eyes. Then He give out teeth and so on. Then he set a day to give out color. So seven o'clock dat mornin' everybody was due to git they color except the niggers. So God give everybody they color and they went on off. Then he set there for three hours and one-half and no niggers. It was getting hot and God wanted to git His work done and go set in de cool. So he sent de angels. Rayfield and Gabb'ull to go get 'em so He could 'tend some mo' business.

⁶ On African-American experience as a field of trauma, and its discursive impact, see M. Johnson 2.

They hunted all over Heben till dey found colored folks. All stretched out sleep on de grass under de tree of. So Rayfield work 'em up and tole 'em God wanted 'em.

They all jumped up and run on up to de th'one and they was skeered they might miss sumpin' they begin to push and shove one 'nother, bumpin' against all de angels and turnin' over foot-stools. They even had de th'one all pushed one-sided.

So God hollered "Git back! Git back!" And they misunderstood Him and thought He said, "Git black," and they been ever since. (29-30)

Although Hurston is telling a humorous story, from its details the negative assumptions about dark skin and the "nigger race" abound within the confines of her vernacular construction of African-America, suggesting a possible "Curse of Ham" influence. It also exemplifies that Black folk, whether joking or not, often question the desirability of their heritage and skin color. This phenomenon was one of the many tragic side effects of slavery and Jim Crow oppression in America.

Black self-hatred may be a tough psychological stance to understand, especially in its relationship to religious rhetoric and writing, but as Na'im Akbar explains: "Once you begin to believe that the deity [God/Jesus] is somebody other than you, then you are put into a psychologically dependent state that renders you incapable of breaking loose until you break the hold of that image" (61). Akbar's research draws a direct correlation between the divine ultimate, or "the deity," and the cognitive self. His belief, like many other Black Nationalists, is that a person's internal image of their ultimate deity influences (positively or negatively) their self-esteem. In racialized terms, if a people's God looks like them, they will feel more secure about their place in this world and, by inference, are better fit to take control of their individual and communal lives (61-62).

The “Curse of Ham,” and other racist Christian church lore, caused many folk within the African-American community to reinterpret the meaning of the stories –and ultimately even religion itself- in their own unique way.⁷ One experimenter was A.M.E. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. His method for circumventing the curse was to “lay it all down at the feet of the Lord.” He put “Negro-ness” on par with God as a rhetorical strategy designed to inspire racial self-pride among African-Americans and directly confront religious-based white superiority myths. This was a public demonstration of a nineteenth-century trend that eventually separated Black folk theology and preaching from the white Christian church tradition in the twentieth century (H. Young 141-152). In his now legendary sermon, Turner posits a popular folk theology, namely, that God is synonymous with, rather than counter to, Black people’s humanity:

We have as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negroe [sic], as you...white people have to believe that God is a fine looking, symmetrical and ornamented white man. For the bulk of you and all the fool Negroes of the country believe that God is white-skinned, blue eyed, straight-haired, projected nosed, compressed lipped and finely robed white gentleman, sitting upon a throne somewhere in the heavens. Every race of people who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by paintings, or by carvings, or any other form or figure, have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destinies was symbolized in themselves, and why should not the Negro believe that he resembles God... (qtd. in Wilmore 125)

Turner's theology was representative of the coming New Negro, fabled in the early 20th century. That he could say what he said publicly, without retribution, is in large part a testament to the agreement of his Black church congregation who at least assented to his views. Although, notable objections were raised to his assertion, scholars document that

⁷ For more information about white folk rhetoric, see Whitford 25-45.

secular audiences panned his work as a much-needed corrective (A. Johnson 30).

The nineteenth-century African-American church plays a vital role in the literacy practices of African-Americans even today, because throughout its checkered history, the Black church has provided one of the few places where Blacks could speak and experiment with ideas without hindrance. It was also one of the few spaces they could try to confront the violent horror of white racial oppression. Over time the experimenting with new visions of Christianity became a folk tradition in itself. It became a way of speaking to, for, and of Black folk. As church historian Gayraud Wilmore reminds us, “the first source of Black theology is the Black community itself” (235):

Such traditions continue to be nurtured outside the church by a segment of the community that has never ceased to provide radical movements of resistance to white oppression whenever the institutionalized churches retreated behind a wall of complacency or fear, or in deference to an apolitical Christianity that belongs more to white evangelicalism than to black faith... (235)

According to Wilmore, “black faith” as a folk religion continues to be utilized as the motivating power for revolutionary and nationalist movements in the African-American community (235).

After Turner, American race relations became more sophisticated but no less violent, but African-American interpretations of their relationship to God, Jesus, and the world continued to evolve. In *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, Arthur Fauset offers a brief history of some of these early twentieth-century spiritual movements, their beliefs, and practices. One example of note, the Moorish Science Temple, adds to the history of Black writers using church lore to speak to and for Black people, because Drew Ali wrote a re-

articulation of the Jesus narrative. His movement, although non-Christian, took on as its central concern reinventing the ideas of a God and Jesus as a redemptive path for African-Americans. The Moorish Science Temple⁸ was founded in 1913 by Timothy Drew who later changed his name to the Noble Drew Ali. Drew's new religion grew out of his dissatisfaction with Christianity and its racially misinterpreted stories, which he viewed as having a stranglehold on African-America. In response to this internal dissatisfaction, Drew created his own collection of "holy scriptures" that combined Christian imagery, eastern philosophy, elements of freemasonry, and Drew's own conservative moral values into a text entitled "The Holy Koran of The Moorish Science Temple of America." The book aims at improving African-American self-esteem by painting a story of Jesus as a world-traveling African philosopher, who teaches human unity. Drew's idea worked – at least for a while – and at its height the movement boasted an international membership of some 20,000. Small sects of the movement still exist today across the country (42-47). Drew told his members that they were no longer Negroes and never had been. They were "Asiatics" or "Moors," the displaced descendants of a rich African legacy, which had been stolen by white interlopers. He even gave them membership cards. His members, in turn, viewed their membership as a release from the oppressive racism of Jim Crow and de facto segregation. Fauset documents that several were arrested for openly refusing to be servile to whites, and some even accosted racists with their membership cards as proof that white rules held no

⁸ Wallace Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad were members of the Moorish Science Temple. Their organization, and may well the original membership, was a spin-off from splintered factions of the Moorish Science Temple (Fauset 46).

sway over their life (42-47). Drew's Black-folk theologizing was done in direct response to notions of inferiority ingrained into the African-American psyche by whites. The Moorish Science Temple example shows how powerful church folklore was in the daily lives of African-Americans – inside and outside of the traditional Christian church (42-47).

In his article, "Black Nationalism," J. Herman Blake describes the type of "cultural nationalism" that the Moorish Science Temple was engaged in.

The essential belief of the cultural nationalists was that a scholarly analysis and study of the history of black people throughout the world, particularly in America, would show blacks and whites that Afro-Americans are descended from a proud heritage and have made outstanding contributions to human progress. It was thought that such an understanding would have two consequences: (1) It would give blacks a positive self-image and further the development of racial pride and solidarity; and (2) it would show whites that blacks were no better nor worse than any other race and that because of their contributions, they should be fully accepted into the society... (17)

Nobel Drew Ali and his Black Moors, however, were not the only Black Nationalists re-inventing Christian church lore.

Marcus Garvey, well known for his racialized view of religion and history, sponsored a movement much like the Moorish Science Temple, but his organization sought to make Blackness not Christianity or Islam the universal religion for all his people. Garvey never underestimated the power of religion, particularly Christianity, within the African-American community, so he did not dispense with it. He understood the church served as the only arena in which African Americans could begin to exercise public control over their lives. Toward this end, Garvey held religion in high esteem, and

he worked hard to recruit pastors into his organization. One of those clergymen was George Alexander McGuire, of the AME denomination. Together, they created a brand new Black church lore system that included widely distributed artifacts that represented the central characters of their stories. They launched their Black God and Black Jesus campaign under the auspices of the short-lived Universal Negro Improvement Association and the African Orthodox Church (Burkett 45-68). As David Van Leeuwen recounts, Marcus Garvey's movement made terrific effort to create a Black Nationalist religious ethos, complete with its own Black God:

The UNIA meetings at Liberty Hall in Harlem were rich with religious ritual and language. For even though Garvey rejected McGuire's effort to transform the UNIA into a black-nationalist Christian denomination, he blended these two traditions in his message. He claimed that African Americans should view God "through our own spectacles" and that "if whites could view God as white, then blacks could view God as black." (2)

In 1924, Garvey, McGuire, and an estimated 200,000 followers, canonized Jesus Christ as a "Black Man of Sorrows" and the Virgin Mary as a "Black Madonna." Garvey used the images as inspirational tools to help his followers succeed in *this* life. In his view, African-Americans needed to worship a God who understood their plight and their suffering and who would help them overcome their present state. Garvey was not interested in promoting hope in the afterlife. Success in this life was the key. Achieving economic, cultural, social, and political success would free African-Americans. Unlike traditional Christianity, the afterlife was not his concern (Burkett 45-68). Garvey claims:

There is a God and we believe in Him. He is not a person nor a physical being. He is spirit and He is universal intelligence...God being universal intelligence created

the universe out of that intelligence. It is intelligence that creates. Man is a part of the creation of universal intelligence and man was created in the image and likeness of God only by his intelligence. It is the intelligence of man that is like God, but man's intelligence is only a unitary particle of God's universal intelligence (Garvey 221)

Garvey took a message of material, social, and political success and transformed it into a religious message. He clearly did not want to challenge the Christian value system of his followers, so he incorporated them into the whole of his vision. In essence, the meanings of Christian signifiers were changed inside African Orthodoxy. The images of Virgin and Child were used as language. Their Black skin was a way of rhetorically constructing Black Nationalist discourse enthymematically. The message of Black Nationalism speaks through signification of the image. The ideas were apparently enduring because, although Garvey's organization faltered after his incarceration and deportation, the image of the Black man of Sorrows Jesus is commonly used in today's Black churches. Similarly, the shrine of the Black Madonna has even showed up as a folklore element in the story *The Secret Life of Bees*. Also, in certain corners of African-American slang, it has become fashionable for two Black men to refer to one another as “god” or “gods,” which I discuss more in chapters 2 and 3.

The problem with creating the Black God and Jesus has always been that the project collapses in the face of traditional and scientific interpretations of the scriptures. Although the Black God and Jesus folklore is creative, and in a sense tactically sound, racializing and recreating the foundational myths of traditional Christianity is still considered taboo in many African-American religious circles. As Henry Lyman Morehouse, the Morehouse College namesake, said after hearing Turner's sermon,

“Brethren, must every race on this planet have a God of its own color—a white God for the white man, a black God for the black man, a red God for the Indian, a yellow God for the Chinese?” (qtd. in A. Johnson, “God is Negro” 30). For this reason, and many others, discussion of the folk roots of the Black God and Jesus concepts, as they appear throughout the history of African-American letters, have taken only marginal root in mainstream academic discourse. More often than not the subject is as marginalized as the people who’ve helped the ideas grow over time.

Although rhetorical studies usually follow the leaders, rather than the followers of a movement, it is important to note that within the development of Black church lore leaders like Turner, Drew Ali, Garvey, and McGuire are expressing ideas that developed in the undercurrent of African-America long before they were ever spoken by those leaders. The relationship between these authors, the words they use to express their particular messages, and the intended audience of those messages is organically cyclical, meaning all parts form the whole. The structure of enthymeme denotes this. In order for an enthymeme to be effective the sender and receiver must be culturally grounded in the message beyond its literal structure.

The Black Nationalist Religious Rhetoric as a Theoretical Field

Black Nationalist religious rhetoric is an under-theorized area of African-American rhetoric studies. Dexter Gordon’s 2003 *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalism* is seminal, but even his detailed rhetorical study of Black Nationalism fails to emphasize the role of religion as a symbolic language in almost all formulations of Black Nationalism. Black Nationalist discourse is inextricably

infused with religious rhetoric, and it often becomes the means of delivering an explicitly Black Nationalist message. Severing Black Nationalist rhetoric from its religious underpinnings lessens the reality of the African-American experience by viewing this phenomenon as coincidental. This study takes Gordon's work a step further, by recognizing the shifting social, political, and rhetorical landscapes of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and paying attention to those shifts as they present themselves in the religious rhetoric of Black Nationalism. Black Nationalist religious rhetoric plays a key role in the constitution of its narrative subjects, not only in text, but also in the real world: "In such constitution, rhetoric constructs individuals into a collective subject: a fictive being that transcends divisions such as interests, age, and class" (Gordon 162). Black Nationalist religious rhetoric, then, creates an ethos that empowers as it encourages its subjects to act with a positive Black worldview: "Through such rhetoric, the ideology, controls its subjects and determines their actions" (163). I embrace and extend Gordon's claim of Black unity by arguing that the religious rhetoric, the rhetor, and the audience operate reciprocally, informing and shaping the ideology and resulting actions together as a form of resistance to cultural and social oppression.

That scholars outside of rhetoric are already discussing the relationship between thinking and speaking as forms of resistance in African-American culture is apparent. Christian theologian Matthew Johnson is a member of a growing number of scholars who recognize that African-American faith practices are often manifested as non-traditional Christian experiences, inextricably tied to language praxis. For Johnson, language about God is an agent of change itself, relied upon by African-Americans because of its

“healing power” and “ability to transform the absurd in our existence into something beautiful and meaningful and into the power to go on” (17). African-Americans’ relationship to language about God is often designed to decouple the African-American subject from the static binaries of Western rationalism. In his essay, “Jesus, the Crucified,” he paraphrases Theophus Smith, saying:

The wisdom tradition of black North American folk culture dissents from the predominant Western form of disjunctive thinking – that conventional ‘either/or’ in which rationalism insists on unambiguous, univocal meanings for things. Instead this tradition prefers the conjunctive ‘both/and’ of archaic and oral cultures, in which ambiguity and multivocality are taken for granted (M. Johnson 16-17).

Johnson understands that the “tradition of black North American folk culture” stands beyond the institutional form of the church. It is harbored in Black folk’s use of language to articulate their experience. The cultural tradition of Black folks language use is what consciously informs the church, as well as being informed by it (Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 4). Johnson also realizes that Black folk culture is not – especially given its dependence upon orality – the exclusive property of the Black church, nor is the thematic elements of church liturgy off limits to Black culture, its members, and non-members. In fact, the line that creates the sacred/secular binary is blurred, if not completely dispensed of within the Black Soul Speech tradition. The relationship between the Church, in its Christian and non-Christian forms, and the State is circular not oppositional or necessarily hierarchical. Even during slavery, not all African Americans invested in the institutional Christian church, but by the twentieth century most African Americans understood life through a Christian-influenced lens that allows for a fluidity of rhetorical

meaning in the use of language (Mays and Nicholson 14-28). The following examination of the *The Salt Eaters*, *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* in chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how the secular Black society influenced religious practice as much as religious practice informed African-American social behavior; the recursive relationship is endemic to the phenomenon.

In chapters 4 and 5, I treat what Adenike Davidson calls the “Black Nation novel” as a historical rhetorical artifact, for in novels, the Black God trope does its most explicit work. While not the exclusive genre analyzed in this dissertation, I place emphasis on the novel because of the discursive freedom offered to rhetors by this genre of writing. William Wells Brown, Sutton Griggs, Pauline Hopkins, William Melvin Kelley, Samuel Greenlee, and others are examples of the diverse array of writers who have used the Black God trope in a novel to weave a Black Nationalist narrative. While not a literary study, this examination includes the novel genre to demonstrate Black Nationalist religious rhetoric, because the novel operates a mediated conversation between a writer and a reader or communicator and interpreter. As culturally and historically situated, the novels chosen for this study were written at a specific time in American history to point to that history; thus, the novel arises in a kairotic moment, the opportune moment for women in Black Nationalist religious rhetoric. The novels are didactically positioned to speak to African-American readers who understand what they are reading about Black group identity. By employing their unique Black God tropes, these authors construct rhetorical arguments of resistance designed to guide a reader’s focus and feelings.

Chapter Outline

Black Nationalism is a broad term employed narrowly in this dissertation. This research focuses on only four arenas within Black Nationalist discourse: Religious Nationalism, Cultural Nationalism, Womanism, and Ethiopianism. All the works examined here could fit in multiple categories, if not all of them, but each is analyzed by the main emphasis of its author. For instance, Walker can be classified as a cultural nationalist as well as an Ethiopianist in *The Color Purple*. Similarly, Elijah Muhammad is a religious nationalist but his efforts are founded on a type of appeal to cultural nationalism. However, for the sake of brevity and organization, each rhetor and their rhetoric has been positioned as an example of rhetoric leaning toward one field or another as a means of systematizing the role of the Black God trope in Black Nationalist religious rhetoric. Religious Nationalism uses religion (Christian and non-Christian) as the ideological center of Blackness. Sutton Griggs, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, and Elijah Muhammad are representatives of this type of discourse. Elijah Muhammad and Black Muslim rhetorics are representative of this field. Cultural Nationalism is associated with aesthetic movements like Molefi Assante's Afrocentrism or Amiri Baraka's Black Arts movements. Clarence 13X Smith and his Five Percenters movement demonstrate the Black God Trope's use as a street culture, religious nationalism. Womanism offers a gendered critique of Black Nationalism and is represented here by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara. Transforming both, Walker conjoins Womanist views with Ethiopianism, a form of proto-Black Nationalism most closely associated with nineteenth-century concepts of redemptive suffering and African-America's manifest

destiny in reference to the liberation and salvation of Africa. Chapter 5 explores the ways *The Color Purple* stands in this Ethiopianist tradition to make its Womanist argument.

Rhetorically examining these rhetors and their texts allows for competing Black Nationalist ideologies to be considered side-by-side. Each rhetor develops an enthymematic discourse based on a unique Black God trope for the purpose of resisting oppression and for racial uplift. The structure of my rhetorical analysis in each of the following chapters addresses three general points: 1) The Black God trope in action. Each rhetor uses tropological language about a Black God and other Biblical imagery to point to deeper Black Nationalist meanings. Clear and concise is not the aesthetic in this type of rhetoric. Meaning must be interpreted through a culturally informed analysis of the utterance. 2) Black Nationalist religious rhetoric. Each chapter explores the question: What Black Nationalist arguments are the rhetors making with their use of religious rhetoric and for what purposes? 3) Black and White Hegemony. Each chapter also addresses the question: What rhetoric does each rhetor respond to, either as affirmation or resistance, on either side of the color line?

Chapter 2 focuses on Religious Nationalism and the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam via Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. This chapter demonstrates how Black rhetors used writing about God to create a language that reflected African-Americans' shifting subjectivity within the American experience. The chapter briefly sketches the rhetorical history of racism in America and begins a conversation about the Black God trope as a writing strategy of resistance. The texts this chapter focuses on are *A Message to the Blackman in America* and two speeches by Malcolm X. *A Message to the*

Blackman in America is a seminal text in the history of Black Nationalism. Written as an extended jeremiad, it contains an intertextual argument with Christianity that must be examined through its use of language to even be partially understood by non-members. Muhammad's Yacub myth is rebellion in its structure and ordering of time. Malcolm X's speeches betray his indebtedness to Elijah Muhammad as an intellectual forefather and demonstrate how Muhammad's world-view shows up as material ethos in the speech acts of a major modern American rhetor. Malcolm is used here to demonstrate how writing influences speaking in African-American discourse. Both men demonstrate the use of religious rhetoric to resist white supremacy.

These examples encapsulate, and in many ways articulate, Black Nationalism in the mid-twentieth century as an historical rhetorical moment. This chapter shows that the Black Muslim tradition is buried in the language and logic of these texts. These two rhetors articulate an important Afrocentric way of viewing the African-American experience that understands the centrality of African-Americans to themselves for themselves. Afrocentricity displays itself as a proclivity within all the texts examined here.

Chapter 3 examines Cultural Nationalism. It links Clarence Smith and the Five Percent Nation of the God and Earths to Elijah Muhammad's rhetoric about the Black man as God. This chapter uses the story of Clarence Smith and the Five Percenters to discuss the Black God trope as a type of cultural nationalism, highlighting its relationship to Black Nationalism, African-American religion, Black rhetoric, and African-American literature. This chapter reviews relevant scholarship that informs the conversation about

this form of Black Nationalist religious rhetoric as a field of discourse. It also answers one of the major questions of this study directly: How and why did Black Nationalists create a rhetorical Black God trope? Phrased differently, how do the Black God trope and Black Nationalist Religious Rhetoric inform us, and how can we become informed by them? These questions are answered by knowing the enthymematic discourse of Smith and the Five Percenters: who is communicating; to whom they are trying to communicate; when they are communicating; what ideas they are concerned with; what medium they use to express their ideas; and why they have made those rhetorical decisions.

Smith's self-conscious self-defining statement about being God embodies the same self-conscious self-definition involved in the process of shifting nomenclature from "Negro" to "Black" in the '60s. His rhetoric sprang from African-America's continuous conversation about the ever evolving "I" that melds into "We." This chapter demonstrates that Black Nationalist religious rhetoric is a codified rhetoric that uses religious images and themes to speak with an African-American audience about being Black, even while whites are present for the rhetorical act.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Black God trope as employed in the womanist novel. It examines the character constructions in *The Salt Eaters*, *Beloved*, and *The Color Purple* as gendered Black Nationalist rhetoric. Individuality, spirituality, communal healing and the centrality of women and feminist rhetorics are common Black Nationalism themes contained within these novels. They demonstrate the prevalent use of the Black God trope in the post-Soul novels written by women. I use these three novels as examples of late

twentieth-century Black Nationalisms that are characterized by Black writers using the Black God trope to reclaim Black women's centrality to the human project. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara, specifically, use Black God tropes to assert their gendered voice. Their works remind us that African-American women are integral to the vitality and function of Black people, but male chauvinism often substitutes women's voices for their form. The Black God trope is invoked after the Black Power movement by authors like Walker, Bambara, Kelli Brown Douglass, and Morrison to express this silencing.

In *The Salt Eaters* Bambara performs "Communal Healing" inside and outside the novel. I use her work as an example of how Black Nationalist rhetoric is embedded as a discourse in an African-American literary text. Bambara is also examined here because of her view of Black women novelists as "cultural workers," a metaphor I extend to Morrison and Walker. In *Beloved* Toni Morrison creates an intentionally Black novel that shows how slavery's past haunts the present. One overlooked aspect of her novel is the importance it places on the folk church, symbolized in the character of Baby Suggs. I argue that this focus, symbolized by Baby Suggs sermon, is a Black God trope that allows Morrison to engage in Black Nationalist rhetoric, as a world-building process. I analyze Baby Suggs sermon in the woods to reveal the Black nationalist rhetoric and perspective contained within it. *The Color Purple* is included here because of its Womanist God and its resistance to multiple forces of oppression.

Chapter 5 continues the discussion of *The Color Purple*, by joining Walker's views on Black Nationalism, Womanism, and Ethiopianism into a womanist theology

that she argues for in her interviews and articles as well as in the novel. The epistolary dialogue Celie has with God throughout *The Color Purple* dramatizes Walker's theology as the novel continually explores why God continues to let evil persist. Walker's answer is because we let it. By taking hold of the immediate oppressions surrounding them and claiming self-worth in their lives, Walker's characters, Celie and Shug, are resilient in the face of the larger oppression that surrounds them. The novel suggests that Celie is able to find wholeness independent of patriarchal rule embodied (or disembodied, as it were) in a distant creator God by a return to Africa and reunion with her sister. In this case, a return of an African mother lost in America to mother Africa. An understanding of Ethiopianism's vision of redemptive suffering illuminates Blackness as enthymeme in the novel and Walker's rhetorical aims.

Chapter 6 concludes this dissertation by offering one final example of the Black God trope, using James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*. Johnson uses the Black God trope to transform the oral tradition of African-American preaching into verse poetry, reaching audiences beyond the confines of the Black church. This explication argues for the flexibility and adaptability of the Black God trope as a rhetorical strategy across genres, time periods, and religions. The Black God trope as strategy highlights the enthymematic discourse throughout African-American history without having to argue for a chronological tradition or ancestry for Black Nationalist religious rhetoric. Following this analysis are suggestions for future teaching and research in the field. Understanding the Black God trope and Black Nationalist religious rhetoric is central to

the African-American experience and offers a pathway to new and creative teaching and research methods that engage diversity and multivocality.

CHAPTER II

A MESSAGE TO THE BLACKMAN IN AMERICA: ELIJAH MUHAMMAD'S INFLUENTIAL RELIGIOUS RHETORIC

Elijah Muhammad is a pivotal figure in Black Nationalist history because of his rhetorical influence. From 1935-1975, he was the author of three books, over three hundred newspaper articles, and countless speeches and essays which were the cultural storehouse from which great orators like Malcolm X pulled. Muhammad developed his own publishing and distribution network from the 1950s until his death in 1975, printing his books and the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper (Fraser 81). When he died the Nation of Islam had a newspaper circulation estimated at one million plus, its own publishing house, and a national membership of over 100,000.⁹ Muhammad's writing was getting read and acted upon, even after his death (Goldman 1). Muhammad continues to have a profound influence over the shape of Black Nationalism in America. Across the past sixty years, he has been widely read by Black audiences. As C. Eric Lincoln notes, Muhammad and his Black Muslims "spared no effort to contact the Black masses through every available medium of mass communication" (Lincoln 124). *Message to the Blackman in America* (hereafter *Message to the Blackman*) has been eclipsed by Malcolm X's autobiography since they were first released in 1965. But *Message to the Blackman* has nonetheless been a staple in Black Nationalist circles. 31 editions were published

⁹ The Southern Poverty Law Center estimates the current *Nation's* membership at about 20-50,000. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/nation-islam>

between 1965 and 2012.¹⁰ Most notably, the book received renewed interest upon Muhammad's death in 1975, when UBUS Communications Systems, a Black-owned publisher, republished it for a non-Muslim audience. In 1997, the book got another boost in readership when it was first published online by UBUS. In 2007, the Nation of Islam under the guise of Louis Farrakhan took back control of the text via the Messenger Elijah Muhammad Preservation Society (MEMPS), the group currently listed as publisher of the book (Khalifah). *Message to the Blackman* continues to be read by both members and non-members of the Nation of Islam. What makes *Message to the Blackman* significant is its ability to codify a brand of Blackness that acts as a rhetoric of resistance to white oppression.

Muhammad wrote to African-Americans that he was trying to convert to his organization, so he did not rely on white America to directly mediate the publishing process, because he had the means to write, publish, and distribute his ideas on his own. Understanding the influence of Muhammad's religious rhetoric and his thirty years of literary output expands scholarly knowledge on Malcolm X, Farrakhan, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Power movement. An analysis of *Message to the Blackman* offers insight into the signs, symbols, and signifying myths of the Nation of Islam and sheds light on Muhammad's contribution to the development of the idea of a racially Black God in African-American religiosity. Muhammad's rhetorical invention that created a new God as a form of rhetorical resistance highlights issues of marginalized voices, agency, faith-based liberation movements, and writing as activism. His mission required

¹⁰ OCLC information on Elijah Muhammad's publishing efforts can be found here by doing an author search: <http://uncg.worldcat.org/wcidentities/lccn-n81071685>.

sophisticated rhetorical strategies that he employed toward his audiences. Audience members are intentionally re-orientated by his rhetoric toward a Black God. Readers must think *inside* the logic of Muhammad's religious rhetoric to comprehend its ideological shift and its rhetorical resistance. This rhetorical resistance threads throughout his writings. The questions I answer with this chapter are: 1) how did Elijah Muhammad create a "Black God" with his specific use of religious rhetoric? And, 2) how did this rhetoric influence his greatest convert, Malcolm X? Through associating Malcolm's words and Muhammad's ideas in one of Malcolm's speeches, I establish Muhammad's rhetorical influence on Malcolm and his cultural milieu. Not only does this demonstrate the power of Muhammad's rhetoric to promote a Black Nationalist worldview using a Black God trope to do so, but it also highlights the differentiation of the Black God trope's purpose across various ideologies and theologies associated with Black Nationalist religious rhetoric. By analyzing examples of Muhammad's Yacub myth and Fard Muhammad lore as religious rhetoric, this chapter demonstrates how the Black God trope functions as a Black Nationalist response to white nationalist rhetoric. Muhammad's writings use Yacub and Fard as galvanizing figures that help create the particular Black Nationalist ethos as credible for the Nation of Islam. Yacub can be identified in the logic and reasoning (logos) of Malcolm X's trope-filled public speaking style as his means of inverting white Western aesthetics and creating in-group sympathy (pathos) for his cause. In the speech "The Truth About Black Muslims" examined in this chapter, Malcolm uses the anti-Christian worldview he learned through Muhammad's Yacub myth to publicly denounce police brutality while speaking in front of a mixed

audience that included Blacks who were Muslims and non-Muslims as well as whites. His coded rhetoric paints Jesus and Moses as criminals while espousing criminality in the face of institutional power as a virtue. Beginning with a brief history of the racist rhetoric that preceded Elijah Muhammad's writing provides the backdrop for understanding "Who Is That Mystery God," excerpted from *Message to the Blackman In America*, as a religious rhetoric of resistance.

Manufacturing Race Through Religious Rhetoric

Muhammad's religious rhetoric is a strategy of resistance that works within and against the racist social framework he is responding to. He is both deconstructing American racism and reifying it. To contextualize the complexity of Muhammad's religious rhetoric, whiteness must be historicized as a social construct. James Noel explains that white racism "entails a whole system of discursive practices" related to the Christian church that illuminates the modern racial moment (70). As a category, race was defined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through a religious discourse that collapsed the concepts of Christian and civilized with the category white as the social norm. This conflation allowed for the justification of the enslavement of Blacks, because, judged against the norm of whiteness, Blacks are judged as less human and, therefore, less inclined toward freedom as their natural condition. In this social schema, Blacks had to be "either savage or naturally servile," or whites would have to recognize their humanity and admit that the two sides were "in a constant state of war" with one another as long as they were framed as polar opposites (70). This white supremacist religious rhetoric predates the judicial and legislative manufacturing of white American society,

and it helped shape the cultural logic used to create and enforce the laws and traditions that made the country.

Noel reminds us that white supremacist religious discourse consisted of “all the material and non-material modes of sacralizing, communicating, structuring, and framing racist exclusionary practices” from the colonial period onward (71). This last point is important because an on-going denunciation against Christianity as a foundational tool of racism runs throughout Muhammad’s rhetoric and the aesthetic vision of his followers. Before any of the legal restrictions that codify and reinforce race took root in this country, a racist cultural worldview propagated through Christianity was already established. This worldview deconstructed and destructed Black African bodies rhetorically and systematically normalized the exploitation and protracted degradation of Africans in the European colonies. With white Christianity so much a part of early America’s educational practices, this worldview was infused into the religiosity and schooling practices of American citizenship in the United States and was taught to whites and Blacks alike as the foundational knowledge of life. Two examples clearly demonstrate this.

In 1706, Puritan minister Cotton Mather published *The Negro Christianized*, to implore his white Christian brothers to accept Blacks as equals into their fellowship in Christ, but not as equals in society. His words betray the racist logic lodged into his concept of human social relationships and religion. They also betray a less than fixed border between Blacks and whites, but a clear belief by the author in white people’s innately superior position in relationship to African bonds people. Mather’s white

supremacist rhetorical position mystifies power relationships to valorize racial pride. Noticeably, the category of “free Black” is not even mentioned in his statement. Mather conflates Negroes with poverty and private ownership by white people by using the “Providence of God” to link slavery with warped notions of manifest destiny: “It is come to pass by the Providence of God, without which there comes nothing to pass, that Poor Negroes are cast under your Government and Protection. You take them into your Families; you look on them as part of your Possessions; and you Expect from their Service, a Support, and perhaps an Increase, of your other Possessions [sic]” (2). Mather’s racialized Christian lens characterizes slavery as a redemptive process that plays itself out as a divine test of the moral potential of whites. The category of whiteness itself is at stake in Mather’s writing, as his words reinforce the boundaries of an ‘us’ against ‘them’ binary in the fledgling United States social order.

An antebellum example comes from Presbyterian minister Charles Colcock Jones who published *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States* in 1842. In it he not only documents white America’s efforts to use religion as a tool to inculcate slaves into America’s racial hierarchy, but he also uses the book to exhort his “Christian” brethren to tend to the spiritual needs of the “heathen” slave, who is not completely beyond the white man’s form of redemption, despite being inherently inferior. Just as Mather does, Jones shows that the social animus denoted by race was not fixed and was being explicitly taught as a component of mainstream civic instruction. Thus, the category “race” combines free African-Americans and Black slaves into a shared

category set aside for inferiority, thereby rhetorically stifling the possibility of diversity and social stratification within the category of Negro:

That the people of the United States [whites only] indulge prejudices in respect to the Negroes, both in favor of and adverse to them, as a distinct variety of the human family and as a subordinate class in society, is a fact not to be disguised. On the one hand their ignorance, vulgarity, idleness, improvidence, irreligion, and vice, are to be ascribed altogether to their position and circumstances. On the other hand, the race has been from time immemorial just what it is and just what it must continue to be. It occupies the position designed for it in nature and Providence, and no changes and no efforts can ever, on the whole, alter it for the better. (102-103)

Jones believes that if given the opportunity to fully participate in the American enterprise as taught to them by whites via the Christian gospel, Blacks could excel. However, “Providence” ordains a racial hierarchy, according to Jones, so the natural order supports exploitation of Black bodies where Ham’s children belong. He is not just echoing the ignorance of an age gone by, nor is he inventing it as a singular personal belief. He is telling readers what he knows as learned truth, an enduring truth about what humanity is and is not. Jones supports his perspective with multiple learned predecessors and contemporaries who agree with him (140-145). Then for eight pages, he equates his view of slaves with that of free Blacks as well (145-153). This core belief about Blacks in relationship to whites is what fuels the legal restrictions and violence that created the color line that W.E.B. Du Bois forecasts as the single greatest problem of the twentieth century.

The religiously-rooted racist logic of Mather and Jones exemplifies the world that created Black Nationalism, figuratively and literally. At the moment Jones is writing,

Solomon Northrup, a thirty-three-year-old free born African-American is being “civilized” by southern white Christians. Born in New York, Northrup is kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana after racist fugitive slave legislation is passed. He is held captive for twelve years because of laws prohibiting African-American’s speaking in open court. Once allowed to voice his own story, Northrup gives a first-hand account of how white religious rhetoric operates wickedly to construct racism. He cites a particularly tame Louisiana slave holding minister as his evidence:

Our master's name was William Ford ... He is now a Baptist preacher. Throughout the whole parish of Avoyelles, and especially along both shores of Bayou Boeuf, where he is more intimately known, he is accounted by his fellow-citizens as a worthy minister of God. In many northern minds, perhaps, the idea of a man holding his brother man in servitude, and the traffic in human flesh, may seem altogether incompatible with their conceptions of a moral or religious life ... But I was sometime his slave, and had an opportunity of learning well his character and disposition, and it is but simple justice to him when I say, in my opinion, there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford. *The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light.* Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different. (90, emphasis added)

Northrup’s oddly phrased praise of Ford shows the measure of his esteem for the man and possibly his critique of white religious rhetoric. “There never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man,” may be signifying a great skepticism of white religious rhetoric altogether. Ford is good only in comparison to the evil by which he is measured. He is a good slave master, but a slave master nonetheless, which is always associated with evil for Northrup. Only “some” Northerners would look at Ford as a hypocrite, a possible

allusion to Northrop's intimate knowledge of his own family's Northern slavery past and the racist attitudes that helped make it possible. In addition, Northrup is all too aware of abolitionism, so he undercuts all this public praise by telling of his callous sale by Minister Ford to pay off a family debt and make a profit for himself (91). Those are not the actions of a good man, nor is Northrup's description of him that of one either. In this particular passage, Northrup noticeably connects Ford's Christian beliefs and ministerial position to his ironic position as a slave holder, pointing to the abnormality of whiteness, and white religious logic, as normative. He knows the operating contradictions in Christian philosophy and points out the hypocrisy in Ford's actions, even as he praises him. Going beyond abolitionist sentiment, Northrup carefully points out that the logic of race is comfortable with its hypocrisy and contradictions. He also notes that in 1842, the pervasive racism that is endemic to the United States living system is a caste system preserved and disseminated in the oral, visual, and written culture of white Americans, taught by "their fathers" as a religion.

Rather than emphasize the material results of slavery, Northrup focuses on its human causes and their connection to the Christian church. As SallyAnn Ferguson claims, "by depicting the slavery regime as a brutal theological patriarchy, the slave authors illustrate how it affords white American men the unprecedented opportunity to appear divine by reconstructing, genetically and mentally, the dark-skinned people fashioned by the universal creator" (298). White Americans sought to "sustain their supposedly exalted position through psychological manipulation of both themselves and their victims" using Christianity as a tool of violence to do so (298).

The white religious worldview that Jones, Mather, and Northrup write about is what Elijah Muhammad's rhetoric is responding to. By the nineteenth century "whiteness" and "Negro-ness" are codified but their referents are still not yet clearly determined. In 1889, for example, Charles Chesnutt wrote "What is a White Man?" to point to America's institutionalized hypocrisy and shifting definitions, of "white" and "Negro" across the country. He deliberates on the fate of "mixed blood" Americans like himself branded inferior because of their African roots, despite even the possibility of that blood producing visibly light-skinned complexions. He critically underscores the xenophobic logic of a society that bases its laws on irrational cultural customs and the constantly shifting sands of human skin biology. Rape, consensual sex, and lawful and unlawful marriage created an ad hoc American population that could not be neatly fit into the rhetoric of white racism by the late nineteenth century. But it had to, even if that meant rhetorically contorting the inherent diversity of America's populous.

Racial segregation and purity laws enacted in the twentieth century were, in part, created to artificially bolster the racial rhetoric of the past that was illogical at its roots. Realistically, a racially two-pronged society could not stay harmoniously afloat without the members of its two categories coming into accidental and intentional contact with one another. The advent of the serial newspaper helped propagate the idea of Black inferiority, even while Blacks with access to public voice fought hard to claim rhetorical space for their side of the story. By the dawn of the first world war, most Americans had a fixed, racist understanding about the "natural" relationship of Blacks within the social hierarchy. Progressive era local, state, and federal legislation fueled such a culture of

racial violence against Blacks in the United States that “whites on top and blacks on bottom” was the de facto order of the day. In 1922, for instance, Du Bois expressed outrage over the growing prison industrial complex and its relationship to the shrinking Black labor force in the South. He cites the case of Samuel Moore as evidence that America intended to keep Blacks in bondage perpetually. Moore, 48, spent 37 years in prison for a nonviolent criminal offense because the value of his forced labor outweighed the value of his humanity vis a vis white racist laws and logic (Du Bois 249-250).

Elijah Muhammad stepped to the forefront as a race writer at a historic moment when global white imperialism was begun in earnest, when racial segregation in America was at its height, when civil rights was in its infancy, and when the African-American social condition was in fact that of second-class citizenship. Freedom was better than slavery for most Blacks, but the turn of the twentieth century also highlighted for just as many America’s need for a social order with Blacks as its fixed underclass. During the First Great Migration, Muhammad immigrated north from Georgia to Michigan as Elijah Poole to escape the ravages of the southern poverty and its treatment of Blacks. During his childhood, Muhammad learned to read using the Christian Bible from his father who was a Baptist lay preacher. Georgia taught Muhammad the violent pathology of the racist mindset and its pervasiveness in white American culture and society. The South also taught Muhammad how to fight against it with the written word. After joining the Universal Negro Improvement Association and eventually The Moorish Science Temple, he finally joined a Black Nationalist organization that centered around his friend and spiritual mentor, Wallace Fard in 1933. Their religious movement was dedicated to the

uplift of the Black race. Armed with faith and a typewriter, Muhammad set out to change the world with the oral Black Nationalist religious rhetoric that Fard purportedly taught him. Muhammad intuitively understood the rules of engagement in the rhetorical war he claimed to be sent to prosecute. His rhetorical resistance resides in his Black God mythology. The symbols and significations involved in this new God mythos work on in its intended audience's emotions and logic to reposition their rhetorical selves in relationship to perceived white social power. Muhammad's strategy is to reimagine stock images from Christianity, merging them with a villain and hero of his own making: Yacub and Fard.

Elijah Muhammad's Rhetoric of Resistance

Muhammad's rhetoric of resistance works within and against the racist social framework he is responding to by manipulating his role as a prophetic voice to assume narrative control of his text, and by extension capture the imagination of his presumed target audience. Muhammad is both deconstructing American racism and reifying it by using the jeremiad rhetorical genre to create authority for his vision of racial power relationships in the United States. The jeremiad is a political form of apocalyptic rhetoric, deriving its name from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. This genre usually promises an inevitable cataclysmic end of the oppressor and acts as a final warning to the doomed and chosen who may read it (Howard-Pitney 5-7). This strategy uses a rhetorically constructed Black God to voice the concerns of the prophetic persona who created it. With "prophetic persona," I am arguing that Muhammad, as a writer and speaker, assumes the character of a divine messenger in order to build authority for himself as

well as invoke cultural traditions of his target audience. A rhetor who adopts a prophetic persona is attempting to dictate the rhetorical situation by preemptively blocking audience resistance to themselves, placing authority in the ethos of an absent, yet irrefutable authority, i.e. God (A. Johnson, "Prophetic Persona" 270). The rhetor assumes a position of having knowledge through, dreams, meditations, or in this case, direct instruction, and shares it with his audience: "It is a secret or divine revelation revealed only to the prophet/speaker and it becomes the speaker/prophet's job to disclose the previously hidden" (271). Muhammad does not challenge the structure of a rhetorically distant God, he uses it instead to substitute what that image means to a predominately Black Christian audience, aligning the image with his contemporary sociological context. For example, Muhammad assures his readers that he is going to prove "that I am with Allah (God) and that Allah is with me," in order to associate and join with his Black God trope:

... in spite of their ignorance of Allah and myself, whom He has sent. For I am not self-sent and the world shall soon know who it is that has sent me.

Allah (God) loves us, the so-called Negroes (Tribe of Shabazz,) so that He will give lives for our sake today. Fear not, you are no more forsaken. God is in person, and stop looking for a dead Jesus for help, but pray to Him whom Jesus prophesied would come after Him. He who is alive and not a spook.

Do you hate me because I represent Allah, the Living God, your Lord and my Lord? Can you, who believe in a mystery God (unknown), trust your Mystery to bring you bread or to defend you against your open enemies? If so, on what occasion did He help you? If God is a mystery, you are lying to the world when you say that you know Him. (4)

By positioning himself as the conduit of divine revelation and drawing his readers into an ‘us’ against ‘them’ rhetorical position, with group phrases like “Allah loves us,” Muhammad invites his readers into a new rhetorical relationship with the idea of God. He not only challenges racialized notions of God, but he is also stating that “ideas, conceptions and reality of God are not fixed,” and “these very ideas come from people using language (rhetoric) to describe and construct their own visions and ideas of God” (A. Johnson, “God Is Negro” 38).

At times critiquing his audience’s normative values, at other times challenging his audience’s aesthetic sensibilities, Muhammad’s writing is marked by his strategic use of style, diction, and symbolism to persuade his audience of his intellect and authority. Muhammad’s Black God trope allows him to work within the dominant structure of American discourse while working against it. The goal is to use Black religion’s reliance on the images of God, Jesus, and the Abrahamic prophets to deconstruct the worldview that white religious rhetoric helped create. Muhammad does this, in part, by infusing the Nation of Islam’s religious mythos with two characters who figure largely, and exclusively, in Black Muslim theology: Mr. Yacub and Master Fard Muhammad.¹¹ Once Muhammad destabilizes his audience’s reliance on a “mystery God” he substitutes that God with Fard and includes the villain Yacub to act as his foil. Adding these two characters to the mythos of African-American religious culture requires, in Muhammad’s

¹¹ Since its inception, there have been notable changes in the Nation of Islam theology and ritual. After Elijah Muhammad’s death, his son Wallace Muhammad gave up Black Nationalism and moved the Nation toward Sunni Islam. He denounced Fard and Yacub theology. Louis Farrakhan revitalized Muhammad’s original teachings in 1976 and then reincarnated what is now known as the Nation of Islam. He has most recently advocated aspects of Scientology as consistent with Nation of Islam theology, but no changes in its foundational components.

estimate, that they be paired with Christian iconography to make them and the messages they contain intelligible. The Nation of Islam does not encourage invention in the way groups like Clarence Smith's Five Percent Nation does (discussed in the next chapter), but they share elements of the same foundational myth. In both theological systems, the inventive use of myth operates as the foundation to the organizing principles and rhetoric of the movement and allows for an in-group conversation.

Muhammad's brand of Black Nationalism takes the form of religious discourse because the vehicle of religion allows him to attack normative social values without completely alienating his core audience of potential converts. Reworking Christian lore allows Muhammad to persuade his audience without offending them. Style and diction offer clear guides to help the uninitiated navigate the import of Muhammad's brand of rhetorical resistance. Muhammad writes *Message to the Blackman* with a conspicuously apocalyptic tone. His language is imagistic and loaded with symbolic meanings that are designed to elicit an in-group response to Christian tropes. Passages like the one quoted above draw readers into a community of believers set against rhetorical whiteness, with Muhammad acting as a divine intermediary. The text is as much a warning to Black people as it is a message.

The opening chapter, "Who is This Mystery God?" answers its thesis by supplanting the mystery god's identity and power and replacing it with Fard and Muhammad:

Who is that mystery God? We should take time and study what has and is being taught to us. Study the word and examine it, and if it be the Truth, lay hold to it.

To teach people that God is a Mystery God is to teach them that God is unknown. There is no truth in such teaching ...

According to Allah, the origin of such teachings as a Mystery god is from the devils! It was taught to them by their father Yacub, 6,000 years ago. They know today that God is not a mystery but will not teach it. He (devil), the god of evil, was made to rule the nations of the earth 6,000 years, and naturally he would not teach obedience to a God other than himself.

So, a knowledge of the true God of Righteousness was not represented by the devils. The true God was not to be made manifest to the people until the god of evil (devil) has finished or lived out his time, which was allowed to deceive the nations (read These. 2:9-10, Rev. 20:308-10). (2-3)

By calling God a mystery, Muhammad invites readers to know what is so mysterious about God and how to demystify whatever it is that is making the relationship between them and him unclear. Muhammad does not give a direct answer to who the mystery God is immediately. Instead, he builds ethos for himself by aligning himself with “Truth” and “teaching.” Subtly, Muhammad prepares readers to deconstruct two fundamental tenants of racist American Christianity—abstract distance between God and man and divinely ordained white superiority—by joining the two ideas into his history of Black oppression by whites in America.

Muhammad balances his controversial argument with plainly written, eloquent, editorial Standard American English. His voice is authoritative, but not accusative. His writing is not ornamental; it is matter-of-fact. He is writing to be heard and understood, not to entertain. There is a notable absence of incendiary words in the text and no direct mention of Christians or white people. Instead, Muhammad uses colloquialisms like “the unintelligent” or “ones without divine knowledge” to signify his ideological adversaries. He also uses the third-person pronouns “them” and “they” to signify whites and

Christians. Of course, Muhammad does specifically mention his opponents in other places within the larger text, but they are absent in this opening statement. In the larger framework of the text, this small passage helps establish Elijah Muhammad's ethos with his audience. It also positions him and Fard as God in opposition to the ostensibly white God of Christianity. As the passage below demonstrates, Muhammad skillfully uses the Bible to make his anti-Christian argument:

The shutting up and loosing of the devil mentioned in Rev. 20:7 could refer to the time between the A.D. 570-1555 when they (John Hawkins) deceived our fathers and brought them into slavery in America, which is nearly 1,000 years that they and Christianity were bottled up in Europe by the spread of Islam and Muhammad (may the peace of Allah be upon him) and his successors ...

For the past 6,000 years, the prophets have been predicting the coming of God who would be just and righteous. This righteous God would appear at the end of the world (the world of the white race).

Today, the God of Truth and Righteousness is making Himself manifest, that He is not anymore a mystery (unknown), but is known and can be seen and heard the earth over. This teaching of a mystery God enslaves the minds of the ignorant.

My poor people are victims of every robbery. They are so pitifully blind, deaf and dumb that it hurts. (3)

"The God of Truth and Righteousness" is Allah, murkily understood as Fard and the Black Muslims. Muhammad's use of the Black God trope in this way is expressly stated in this core myth of the Nation of Islam. Understanding how the Yacub foundational myth works in Nation of Islam theology is an important demonstration of how semantic shifts in a word's cultural meaning can take place without a perceptible shift in the surface construction (grammar and syntax) of language taking place at all. The language and sentence structure of this text, as well as the history surrounding Muhammad's

religious rhetoric reveal that there is more to Yacub and Fard than just a story about the destruction of white people.

Muhammad's use of public address to create a symbolic in-group discourse reflects the social and political context within which *Message to the Blackman* was conceived. In 1965, segregation created a racial binary that made it relatively easy to craft an in-group message to Black people. America's racial binary created two competing worldviews among Blacks and whites that was being exacerbated by integration. Through its discourse, Muhammad's manufactured God brings to life the anxiety many Blacks felt about being forced to integrate with whites. For instance, words used in the text have weighted meaning in order to undercut white America's racial hierarchy. The term "devil" should be understood as a reference to white people. But devil also signifies spiritually evil people in general too. Skin color does not signal the same clear-cut binary within this discourse that it does in white normative logic. Biological race is problematized in Muhammad's rhetoric. The Yacub myth portrays whites as the biological descendants of Africans, and all races have some Black in them; Blacks can be devils too. Similarly, the phrase "Blackman" is a collective term for Black people used interchangeably to refer to African-Americans specifically and the African Diaspora in general. Muhammad has a three-fold meaning of the term "Black people" connected to his understanding of Africa as the source of all human life. There are Black people who are Muslims and Black people who are not. The third type of Black people according to Muhammad's rhetoric are people who are Black because they are not white (ex. Asians and Native Americans). All of the Black people are termed "my people" at varying

intervals within the specific and larger text. “Negro” is almost always prefaced with the phrase “so-called” to signify Muhammad’s belief that the term was heaped on African-Americans as a form of linguistic oppression. According to Muhammad, separating from labels like “Negro” was critical to overcoming the mental slavery that Africans in America are subjects to. Rather than use the term Negro, Muhammad creates a new collective name for African-Americans, “The Tribe of Shabazz,” to re-orient members’ way of thinking about their collective history.

Image-making language is an important element to Muhammad’s religious writings because symbolic images function in his narratives to create a psychological border between Muhammad’s in-group and both the Black and white worlds that surround them. The image of the Tribe of Shabazz, for instance, creates the idea of a unified group struggling to find its freedom from a shared group of captors. The Tribe of Shabazz is analogous to the Children of Israel motif in Abrahamic lore. Jack Daniel and Geneva Smitherman note the importance of this type of “image-making” language in African-American speech:

An important criterion of black talk is the use of images, metaphors, and other kinds of imaginative language...Ideas, trivial or small though they may be, must be expressed in creative ways. Preachers especially must be good at image-making...The figures of speech created in the black linguistic imagery tend to be earthy, gutsy, and rooted in plain, everyday reality. (298)

Muhammad’s image-making language is unique in that it forms a well-documented counter-myth cycle that acts as a meta-language that re-codes race. Edward Curtis elaborates:

This alternative [Yacub] myth represented a radical and creative reconceptualization of black identity by trying to establish black superiority, explain how it was usurped, and explains the conditions necessary for its restoration. Altering a classic dispensationalist, timeline, Muhammad claimed real Earth time began sixty-six trillion years ago, when an explosion separated the moon and the Earth, leaving only the great black tribe of Shabazz, the Earth's original inhabitants, intact. (75)

Curtis sees a radical re-altering of human social relationships within the Yacub myth. In the myth, African-Americans, and by extension all non-whites globally, become the usurped progenitors of white people. The narrative structure of this myth is more in line with the socio-political aspirations of the African-Americans this message was addressed to than white racist readings of Genesis discussed earlier. According to the Yacub myth:

The original Nation spoke Arabic and practiced Islam. Twenty-four scientists, one of whom acted as Judge or God, ruled this paradise. But 6,600 years ago, the original Nation suffered a blow at the hands of a mad scientist named Yacub, who was hell bent on grafting a new race of devils, whites, out of the original man. After six hundred years, the mad scientist's followers succeeded in their horrible task. (75)

Curtis does descriptive, but not rhetorical, justice to the Yacub myth. His reading of the text as an account of Muhammad's belief is limited because it is too literal. A rhetorical understanding of the Yacub myth as a myth that speaks its own language reveals that Muhammad does not seek to give a literal account of human time; rather, Muhammad is using the language of time to expand his readers' vision of what they have come to know as time. His goal is to deconstruct white racist myth and re-construct an intentionally Black perspective. It is not to explain history. This myth's importance is the purpose and function of the narrative's text in relationship to its presumed audience.

Muhammad's myth of the Black God in the form of Master Fard Muhammad is another example of how he uses narrative as a language to re-establish the meaning of the racial category Black. According to Muhammad, God visited the world in the form of a Black man named Wallace Dean Fard, who gave him a message to deliver to the entirety of Black America, although most would not listen. This message said that the Africans who were placed in America during slavery were really a part of the lost Tribe of Shabazz. Their suffering in the United States was a fulfillment of prophecy. Once the modern descendants of these stolen tribe members found out who they really were a re-shaping of the world's power structure would begin (the destruction of white America). Two key components of this new theology are that God, the ultimate, interceded in human affairs in human form and that Black people were made in God's image because Africans created the image of God. Elsewhere in *Message to the Blackman*, Muhammad explains this humanist aspect of his theology: "God is a man and we just cannot make him other than a man, lest we make him an inferior one; for man's intelligence has no equal in other than man. His wisdom is infinite; capable of accomplishing anything that his brain can conceive. A spirit is subject to us, and not we to the spirit" (6). Muhammad elaborates on this theme in a posthumously published theological treatise *Our Savior Has Arrived* in 1975 restating, "Allah is all of us" and "rooted in all of us." "Every righteous person is a god" because "We are all God" (19). Allah is "not something that is other than a man" (26). This conflating of God and man is another effort to create an in-group separate from white supremacy. Muhammad's push for a group identity separate from

whites, Christianity, and even traditional Islam are themes that reoccur throughout his writings and are encoded in the language he uses to articulate his ideology.

Absent in these texts are any Islamic catechism. Although Muhammad alludes to Qur'anic verses frequently in his larger body of writings, these allusions are often balanced out by Christian Biblical verses that highlight the same or a similar point. However, most of his readers were more familiar with the Bible. In Muhammad's writings, the propensity for Biblical allusions are also possibly attributable to his Southern Baptist upbringing (Evanzz 21-23). Muhammad knew some Arabic and is said to have mastered interpreting English translations of the Qur'an (193). Noticeably absent from *Message to the Blackman* is the Arabic language, another indication that demonstrates that his appeal was to an American English-speaking audience, with a Christian worldview. Although the term "Allah" dominates, there is an obvious equivocation of the term with "God," a term more familiar to Western readers. Muhammad affirms his separation from traditional Islam, "which has drunk from the same poison well as Christianity" (Clegg 143-144), referring to the Arab enslavement of Africa prior to, during, and after the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The fallen state of traditional Islam allows Muhammad the rhetorical freedom and space to invent his own corrective.

Muhammad is writing explicitly to (not as a representative for) Black people in America. In 1965, most African-Americans who considered themselves religious were Christian. Textual references to the Qur'an or Arab culture would have been foreign to most of his target audience and created an even greater resistance from readers unwilling

to accept his argument at face value. In order to write a text that African-American readers would understand, and even be persuaded by, Muhammad had to rely heavily on Biblical language to evoke logos, pathos, and ethos.

Muhammad's Black God mythology is a rhetorical resistance strategy that operates as symbols and significations intended to influence converts emotions and logic. *Message to the Blackman* states its assumed readership in the title, but Muhammad also knew that whites were reading his work as well, whether he wanted them to or not. One of the main criticisms Muhammad sought to debunk was the ignorance of African-Americans. That Muslims and Blacks were characterized by both Black and white detractors alike as crazy and/or stupid is another important explanation for the text's formal language choices and the stylization of the Black God trope. As one agenda of Muhammad's mission, his formal speech in *Message to the Blackman* highlights a serious address to an equally serious audience. Muhammad assumes his audience is literate, well versed in English code-switching, and angry with the United States' treatment of its Black citizens. What was at stake for Muhammad was converting African-Americans to his cause. Malcolm X offers some of the most telling testimony as to its efficacy. His speeches contain numerous examples of Muhammad's rhetorical strategies in action. Muhammad's rhetorical inventions are often the moral substance of Malcolm's most impassioned oratory. The next section demonstrates Muhammad's influence on Malcolm's speeches and illustrates in two public addresses how Malcolm reimagines stock images from Christianity, merging them with Yacub and Fard as a means of persuasion. Malcolm X provides a lens that exposes the cyclical relationship

between worldview and ethos as expressed through Muhammad's brand of Black Nationalist religious rhetoric.

Malcolm X's Indebtedness to Muhammad

Malcolm X uses Muhammad's Christian Black God trope by inserting it into a Black Muslim worldview and employs Muhammad's rhetorical strategies to construct a prophetic Black Muslim rhetoric and ethos for himself as public speaker. By 1948 Malcolm was moving into another phase of his spiritual journey, and it is during this time (1948-1952) that he transforms Muhammad's teachings and embraces his own rhetorical agency. This is when Malcolm Little became Malcolm X, and his use of rhetoric and language that reflects his understanding of the world changed. An example of Muhammad's influence comes from Malcolm's 1962 speech protesting police brutality. In it Malcolm declares, "They should give Mr. Muhammad credit for reforming prisoners" in a way "they cannot," referring to white America and the country's racist legal system ("Who Taught You to Hate?"). The "reform" Malcolm is referring to is Muhammad's written message, and its ability to change his behavior in American society. He commonly points to himself as a prime example of Muhammad's conversion power. Shortly after joining the Nation of Islam in 1948, Malcolm officially becomes a public orator, both as a teacher and evangelist of the Nation of Islam. From this point forward, he is more calculated in his language use as a Muslim minister so intentionally embraces the art of religious rhetoric to persuade others. The Black Muslim method was to influence public opinion by using familiar tropes like God, Jesus, and Moses to express its position. Like Marcus Garvey and many others before them, Muhammad and then

Malcolm realized that Christian religious themes held a strong grip on the human psyche, so to change attitudes and behavior they needed to change the mythology surrounding these tropes.

The Black God mythos foregrounds Malcolm's rhetoric and highlights the importance of his encounter with Muhammad, the writer. During Malcolm's Black Muslim years, Muhammad gave the theological message and Malcolm delivered it to the world. Two examples clearly demonstrate Muhammad's Black Nationalist religious rhetoric's influence on Malcolm. This influence becomes the basis of most of Malcolm's rhetorical output and a key to recognizing the relationship between his rhetoric and his meaning in his speeches. That Muhammad's message took root is evident when Malcolm connects white supremacy and oppression of others to Christianity:

Your Christian countries, if I am correct, are the countries of Europe and North and South America. Predominately, this is where you find Christianity, or at least people who represent themselves as Christians. Whether they practice what Jesus taught is something we won't go into. The Christian world is what we usually call the Western world...The colonization of the dark people in the rest of the world was done by Christian powers. The number one problem that most people face in the world today is how to get freedom from Christians. Wherever you find nonwhite people today they are trying to get back their freedom from people who represent themselves as Christians, and if you ask these [subject] people their picture of a Christian, they will tell you "a white man – a Slave-master." (qtd. in Lincoln 27)

Subtly, Malcolm integrates the Yacub myth into his oratory. 'Christianity' is rhetorically framed as 'white people,' and similarly, 'nonwhite people' and 'dark people' are framed as homogenized groups in opposition to whiteness. Thus, Christianity conflates with the scope of human history and Eurocentric imperialism. These super-image terms, to borrow

from Bakhtin,¹² offer Malcolm a particular way of accessing history. Malcolm is using Christian God terms, and the phrasings that they are a part of, to signify the Nation of Islam's perspective on history, a history Malcolm learned through reading the Yacub narrative. In this history, the power relationships between Black and white people as rhetorical constructs, and Africa and Europe as geo-historical constructs are inverted. Whites become the villains and non-whites the heroes. Africa becomes home and Europe and the United States become foreign lands. That "freedom from Christians" is a goal that all "nonwhites" desire is no accident of impassioned oratory. It is a directive, not an observation, as Malcolm prefers that it become a given in his audience's worldview. The pronounced use of the pronouns 'you,' 'we,' and 'they' lend strength to this argument. "We" includes the assumptive 'I,' so it can be inferred that Malcolm is speaking from the perspective of the Nation of Islam. "You" is used to draw his audience into the presumptive perspective of the 'I.' The speaker is talking directly to audience members with this language construct. Lastly, "they" frames "Christians" and "whites" into a collective in opposition to the 'I' of the audience. The calculated use of these pronouns underscores the theological assumption that Christianity is corrupt and permeates Malcolm's argument.

A second example comes from a later passage in the same speech, "The Truth About Black Muslims," a speech given in Los Angeles on May 5, 1962, where he uses Muhammad's theological vision to decry police brutality against Black Muslims. The

¹² Super-image is a term I relate to Bakhtin's four-participant model of dialogue. A super-image belongs to the realm of hero/topic. These hero/topics have weighted cultural import within the cultural context they are used. See Mikhail Bakhtin, et al. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*.

rhetorical context of this speech emphasizes the potency and efficacy of Malcolm's rhetoric. Malcolm is addressing a predominantly Black Muslim audience in front of the white press and with white police officers standing guard. The occasion is a press conference at the Los Angeles Hilton on the eve of Ronald Stokes's funeral. Stokes was an unarmed Muslim killed in an unwarranted raid on Mosque 27. Malcolm's initial plan was to murder the Los Angeles police officers involved in retaliation, but Muhammad stopped him and curtailed the Nation of Islam's public response to nothing more than a press conference (Marable 207-208).¹³ This injunction made the Los Angeles Police Department the focal point of Malcolm's ire, and this tension¹⁴ underlies his rhetoric. Malcolm's opening greeting during the address affirms Muhammad's role as the guide to his words, yet it is the crescendo of the speech where Malcolm demonstrates his rhetorical sophistication in making Muhammad's mythology his own by rhetorically inverting the image of Western power relationships:

They put Moses in jail. They put Daniel in Jail. Why, you haven't got a man of God in the bible who wasn't put in jail when he started speaking out against exploitation and oppression... They charged Jesus with sedition, didn't they do that? They said he was against Caesar. They said he was discriminating because he told his disciples, "Go not the way of the gentiles, but rather go to the lost sheep." He discriminated. Don't go near those gentiles, go to the lost sheep. Go to the oppressed. Go to the downtrodden. Go to the exploited. Go to the people who don't know who they are. Who are lost to the knowledge of themselves. And who are strangers in a land that is not theirs. Go to those people. Go to the slaves. Go to the second-class citizens. Go to the ones who are suffering the brunt of

¹³ Marable relates the full details of this story in *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*. 205-208. It must be noted Herb Boyd and several other notable Malcolm X scholars disagree with Marable's assertions, including the alleged murder plot, in *By Any Means Necessary: Malcolm X—real, not reinvented* (2012).

¹⁴ This tension is felt when Malcolm warns "We will kill you over our women!" speaking of Muslim women being harassed by men, both white and Black. The warning may be directed at the LAPD who beat men and women the night of the Stokes murder.

Caesar's brutality. And if Jesus were here in America today, he wouldn't be going to the white man. The white man is the oppressor. He would be going to the oppressed. He would be going to the humble. He would be going to the lowly. He would be going to the rejected and the despised. He would be going to the so-called American Negro. (Malcolm X, "Who Taught You to Hate")¹⁵

The signifying surface language of Malcolm uses religious allusions to refer to contemporary entities. The "they" signifies both the Roman empire and the Los Angeles Police Department, and he equates Moses, Daniel, and Jesus as similarly persecuted heroes who mirror the martyred Stokes in order to set up the oppositional boundaries between Malcolm's in-group and out-group within that contemporary moment. All four are wrongfully accused by the law and pose as the narrative stand-ins for the persecuted Black Muslims Malcolm is championing. Through Malcolm's rhetoric, they become at once Hebrews and Black Muslims. Malcolm's lengthy Biblical exposition, indicative of the allusions throughout, demonstrates his use of religious images to affect the rhetorical strategies of pathos, by appealing to the emotions of the audience, and logos, by employing logical reasoning and associations. For instance, Malcolm substitutes the Biblical "Gentiles" for a meaning that accuses white America of racism. Jesus "goes away from the gentiles" rather than the Pauline injunction that he went to them, yet another inversion of the white Western aesthetic and Christianity's ecclesiastical authority. Malcolm, a Muslim, is using Biblical tropes to express his Black Nationalist perspective. The propensity runs throughout the entirety of his short public life. Muhammad's theology and rhetoric provides a flexibility of meaning that affords

¹⁵ I am using recorded footage of the live speech to capture Malcolm's real speech patterns as well as the audience's reaction to it. The full speech is available through *American History in Video* <https://tinyurl.com/llk8j5y>.

Malcolm as rhetor the opportunity and ability to talk about the past and present at the same time.

Beginning in 1964, Malcolm's religious life was what Manning Marable characterizes as his Orthodoxy phase (297-417). Malcolm's indebtedness to Muhammad's writings and teachings continue throughout this period, even though Malcolm publicly rejects Yacub and Fard as inconsistent with Islam. After Malcolm leaves the organization, he still grapples with the Nation of Islam's theology and ideology. The year after his Sunni conversion and his taking hajj is spent synthesizing Muhammad's teachings with traditional Islamic thought. He ultimately splits Muhammad's plan in two, creating a spiritual organization (Muslim Mosque Incorporated) and a political organization (Organization of African-American Unity) to facilitate his racial uplift movement. A private letter to Muhammad from Malcolm dated March 11, 1964 tells of Muhammad's influence on Malcolm's life and education:

I announced through the press that it was my own decision to leave. I did not take the blame to protect those National Officials, but to preserve the faith your followers have in you and the Nation of Islam ... *I will always be a Muslim, teaching what you have taught me, and giving you full credit for what I know and what I am. You are still my leader and teacher*, even though those around you won't let me be one of your active followers or helpers. ("Letter," emphasis added)

Malcolm's letter stipulates both indebtedness to the teachings of Muhammad and his belief in how those teachings formed his Muslim identity and agenda. In addition, Malcolm's later public statements often included phrase such as "the Honorable Elijah Muhammad says," even after being expelled from the Nation of Islam. Muhammad's

writings helped Malcolm see himself in the Bible and the world, and they also provided him with the rhetorical tools to project that image of himself back onto the world through his speeches.

Rhetoric as Resistance in Black Discourse

Within the racialized cultural world of America, the ability to use rhetoric to resist the ideological and material onslaught of white supremacy is an essential survival skill for African-Americans. Muhammad and Malcolm are examples of this. Robert Scott and Wayne Brockriede explain in their 1969 *The Rhetoric of Black Power* that language's repetitiveness and flexibility combined provide rhetorical power and persuasion:

“Although a good deal of man's symbolic behavior is ritualistic, his use of language is capable of a high degree of conscious manipulation that enables him to create fresh meanings and to communicate the symbols of these meanings to his fellows more or less efficiently” (4). They explain that in a Black Nationalist paradigm “these verbalizations are formed into rather elaborate campaigns on behalf of some point of view or product. At other times, they are scattered and anyone who senses them must discover the relationships” (4). Both these strategies, the consciously focused rhetorical agenda and the multilayered disparate statements, are common practices of Muhammad and his Black Nationalist religious rhetoric. Understanding these strategies as ubiquitous rhetorical strategies within American Black folk traditions and religious rhetorics more closely aligns Muhammad and Malcolm to them.

In the Black folk tradition, using narrative as rhetoric that combats white supremacy is a central theme that Daryl C. Dance argues performs a cathartic function

within African-America's group psychology. The emotional release provided by Black hero folk tales is a coping strategy and usually comes by way of audience members viewing life through a lens of inverted power relationships possible only in story form. Dance explains the psychological function of the inverted social order within African-American folk storytelling:

From the time of slavery until the present, African-Americans have constituted the bottom rail in American society. Wherever they look, they see themselves in the demoralizing position of powerless victims in hostile territory. It has been mainly through their folktales that they have been able to find some relief from their frustrations and to give some aggressive expression to their hostilities. The tales have allowed the Black slave, the Black freedman, and the contemporary Black militant to act out their hostility without endangering their physical well-being. The tales have allowed them, in a sense, to revolt against their master, boss, or judge in a created world where obstacles are not quite so great and the conditions of combat are a little more equal than they are in real life. (179)

According to Dance, discursively belittling whites helps Black rhetors and their Black audiences mitigate some of the frustrations of their daily lives and enhances their sense of dignity and pride. The main protagonist in these cathartic tales is usually a Black folk hero who primarily takes one of two forms: the Trickster or the Anti-Hero. Unlike his European counterpart, the Black hero does not usually fit into the categories of a hero, defender, or deliverer (Dance 180). In Black Muslim theology Mr. Yacub is a trickster and Master Fard is an anti-hero: "He [Trickster/Anti-Hero] rarely sets out to perform any great feat, to accomplish any noble task, to face any challenging ordeal, or to save a lady in distress. His one goal is usually to outsmart the man, to humiliate him, to outperform him mentally, verbally, physically, or sexually, or to force him to recognize and to respect him" (180). In addition to this list of anti-hero traits, Dance lists the following

negative attributes to the Black anti-hero in the African-American folk tradition: “He may often be a villain; he almost always violates the accepted mores; he fails to follow any rules of combat; he is often inhumanely cruel and sadistic; he is a braggart, a flashy dresser, and lover of showy material things, an untrustworthy, wily trickster, and a potent and virile lady's man” (180). Unlike other types of heroes, the Black anti-hero sees the system as his or her enemy. Although the Black anti-hero seems to be anything but heroic, Dance emphasizes that in the Black folk tradition hearing stories about other Blacks who “bucked the system” gave African-Americans “immeasurable psychological pleasure” (180). The aggression released in these stories reveals a hatred and militancy toward white supremacy (180). These stories also promote group unity by forming a positive in-group conversation. Not only does the Black anti-hero win out against white society in this type of folklore, but he or she is not bound by its rules of morality. Black hero folktales like those created by Muhammad are, in part, militant landscapes that ease the burden of living through the demoralizing position of powerlessness often felt by many African-Americans. They also help form a pro-Black rhetoric that seeks to usurp the rhetorical power of white supremacy.

Gordon Parks’ 1952 image of the “Soapbox Orator” and the Black Jesus image he is holding were in many ways products of Muhammad’s religious rhetoric and organizing. In 1952, Muhammad and the Nation of Islam had a heavy stake in the Black Nationalist news market in Harlem and leaned heavily on the image of a Black Christ to sell their message. *Muhammad Speaks* was a short-lived Black newspaper run by

Malcolm and the Nation of Islam in the 1950's.¹⁶ Each member was required to purchase and sell the periodical, and Harlem was one of Nation of Islam's sales and distribution strongholds. Parks' photo is of an orator selling Muhammad's magazine or competing with his salesmen. As a writer, Muhammad is important when historicizing Black Nationalist religious rhetoric because he and Malcolm situate the American Black folk tradition and Black Christian religious rhetoric squarely in relationship to the religious rhetoric of Black Nationalism. The next chapter continues to explore Muhammad's influence on Black people's articulation of God, when his theology appears in a much more secular context, the philosophy of Clarence 13X Smith and the Five Percent Nation of the God and Earths. In the chapter that follows I argue that Muhammad's style of religious rhetoric is present in many examples of African-American rhetoric in the '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s.

¹⁶ Muhammad also had a long running relationship with Black newspapers across the country. He and Malcolm X spread Muhammad's rhetoric throughout the pages of Black newspapers like the *Amsterdam News* whenever possible.

CHAPTER III

CLARENCE 13X'S BLACK GOD ETHOS AND THE RHETORICAL CHALLENGE OF THE FIVE PERCENT

Elijah Muhammad's Black God rhetoric had an influence on Black culture and the rhetoric of the Black Power movement outside the Nation of Islam. Cultural slogans from the era offer plenty of examples.¹⁷ "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud," "Black is beautiful," and "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" are only a few sayings that the Nation of Islam, the Civil Rights movement, integration, and changing social attitudes brought about, signaling a new context for race debates in 1960s America. This shift in the vernacular is nowhere more evident than African-America's fascination with the teachings of the Black Power movement espoused by the Nation of Islam. The Black Power movement is often characterized as a successor of the Civil Rights movement – African-Americans turned to nationalism once they grew tired of the limits of legislative politics – but a more realistic retelling of history places Black Power and the Nation of Islam as contemporaneous undercurrents of Black culture that developed over time, just like the public institutions that steered the Civil Rights movement. This can be deduced through the rhetoric of public speakers and writers. Clarence 13X Smith,¹⁸ a dissident disciple of Muhammad, provides an illustration of how rooted the Nation of Islam's

¹⁷ See Scott and Brockriede, *The Rhetoric of Black Power*, for insight into this trend.

¹⁸ Clarence Smith had many aliases, Clarence 13X, Father Allah, Allah, and The Father are only a few. For the sake of clarity, he will be referred to throughout as either Clarence 13X Smith or just Smith, unless otherwise noted.

rhetoric became in more secularized areas of post-soul African-American culture.

Smith's Five Percent theology demonstrates how language use itself became a method of resistance and identity formation during the Black Power movement. At the height of the Black Power movement, Smith changed his name to Father Allah, and formed a quasi-religious cult called the Five Percent Nation of Islam. This group used a coded-language to create its ethos, one that exemplifies the Five Percent's deep engagement with the theology of the Nation of Islam and the strategic use of the Nation's religious rhetoric as a persuasive tool to create a new in-group identity. An examination of Smith and his Five Percent Nation of Islam demonstrates the function code-switching and narrative in religious rhetoric serve in the development of a marginalized language community. This process is a method of "deep structure knowledge transfer" where the "surface features" of knowledge ("literal objects, concepts, or entities explicitly described in a problem statement or situation") are used by rhetors to point audience members to new meaning in the "deep structure" ("schema" or "mental models students have constructed") of a story or utterance (Chi and VanLehn 177-179). An examination of the Five Percent Nation's written rhetoric, with attention given to the fact that it is written to be performed, illustrates how small, less established, marginalized groups that exist within larger, more well established, marginalized groups use rhetoric to fight through their double marginalization to create voice, agency, and identity for their new language community and its members (Shopen x). Smith's story reveals a group of African-Americans intent on using language as a means of maintaining a positive marginalized identity that

critiques society's dominant classes and cultures by using the body and voice as performance spaces that enact the message of their rhetoric.

This chapter traces the Black God trope in Five Percent rhetoric to demonstrate that the trope's use is a rhetorical resistance strategy that is also employed in secular discourses. Its use points to shifts in the cultural logic of African-Americans described earlier, as well as the Five Percenters' response to the ideological milieu in which they were involved. The shift in this instance is signified by a main tenant within Five Percent theology: the teaching of a God of Self. This God is a departure from the external Gods of the Nation of Islam and Christianity in its humanist focus. This formulation of the Black God trope fits into the Black Nationalist rhetorical tradition, but is unique in how the Five Percenters use it as a performed cultural language to create a rhetorical pathway to African-American liberation. Tracing the Black God trope in this way makes visible an important shift in self-identification for a group of African-Americans during the 1960s. During this decade, many Blacks moved from self-identifying as "Negroes" to demanding that others address them as "Blacks" and/or "Afro-Americans." Many people also resorted to changing their names and giving their children African and Arabic influenced names in the following decades. This shift signifies something more important than simple nomenclature. It is a vital act of self-definition that signals to African-Americans and everyone else, "We belong to us, not them." Smith and the Five Percenters' religious rhetoric offer concrete examples of this rhetorical shift.

The Five Percent Nation went to great lengths to construct a group ethos that embraced Blackness as a positive social position morally and rhetorically set apart from

the rest of society. Creating this rhetorical position for themselves involved responding to three immediate challenges, which their founding literature speaks to. Those challenges are the Nation of Islam as orthodoxy, white supremacy and institutionalized racism, and the politics of race symbolized by the subordinate role of African-Americans in United States society. I deal with each one of these challenges individually in this chapter, as they demonstrate how Five Percent rhetoric works and functions to persuade its intended audience. The Nation of Islam is the most important influence on Five Percent theology because it is the ideological root of the surface and deep structure content of Five Percent rhetoric. The Nation also added life and death consequences to the Five Percenter's rhetoric in the '60s with Smith paying the price of death for usurping that group's ethos.¹⁹ I engage their shared story in the "Smith's Prophetic Black God Ethos" section, situating Smith's rhetoric into the Black prophetic tradition. In the "120 Lessons" section that follows I show how the Five Percent's founding narrative challenges white supremacy with its use of embodied language and narrative as instruction tools. In the "Influence" section I discuss how the Five Percent Nation grew by offering a form of rhetorical liberation to Black Americans facing the pressures of integration, desegregation, and intra-racial class stratification. These relational dynamics show themselves in the epistemology embedded in the rhetoric and rhetorical practices of the Five Percenters.

¹⁹ Biographers debate on the motive for Smith's murder or his murderer, that the Nation of Islam assassinated him is one of several conspiracy theories surrounding his demise. Cuba provides his own analysis alongside newspaper clippings that document the murder.

Smith's Prophetic Black God Ethos

Smith used Five Percent rhetoric to articulate a new vision of Blackness that took the social pressures of urbanization and integration into its theological consideration, ridding itself of the racial essentialism implicit in Muhammad's theology. According to an FBI report, on May 31, 1965, Clarence Edward "13X" Smith, a former bodyguard for Malcolm X, was arrested by New York City police officers for felonious assault, conspiracy, disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and possession of marijuana. Smith was the main instigator of a near-riot led by a street gang who called themselves "the Five Percenters." He and his cohorts were arrested for assaulting two police officers who asked them to leave the Harlem street corner where they were preaching about the Black man being God (FBI). Smith and his fellow Five Percenters claim they were victims of racial profiling, police brutality, and government repression of their first amendment rights (Cuba 8). The differing perspectives of the arresting officers, the Five Percenters, and the FBI agents who later report the incident underscore the urgent need for many Blacks to find a way to speak to each other and the world through a voice and language all their own. Once in custody, Smith was held on a \$9,500 bond, remanded to Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital, then transferred to Mattawan State Hospital for the criminally insane for two years because of his emphatic insistence that he was God. Smith, in fact, refused to be addressed by any name other than "Allah." Initially, arresting officers thought that Smith was drunk or intoxicated from some other substance, but the depth of his delusional ramblings about being God, made them think that he had a psychological disorder. Arresting authorities may have also been responding to the fact that Smith had a

well-documented influence on the youth in his neighborhood (Allah 236-241). They did know, for instance, that he was a “trouble maker” and a part of New York’s “Black Muslim problem” and reported his otherwise trivial arrest to federal authorities as a part of a larger investigation into the leadership of Black Nationalist organizations (FBI). When brought in front of Judge Joseph Obrien’s court to answer for himself, Smith held fast to his claims of personal godhood, telling everyone present that “the black man is a god” and those Blacks who have “knowledge of self” are the “poor righteous teachers” of the earth sent by Allah to bring about “freedom, justice, and equality” to the oppressed (Allah 112).

Police officers and court officials did not know that Smith, whether delusional or not, was engaged in a sophisticated form of rhetorical theology²⁰ that aligns him with a prophetic tradition that is synonymous with the Black church and the jeremiad tradition Muhammad chose to write within. Rhetorical theology places emphasis on the speaker’s or writer’s use of religious language to persuade his or her audience to a certain position or state of thought. Like others before him, Smith engaged in a public theology that had as its aim a persuasive function within the specific context it was used, i.e. fighting white racism (A. Johnson, 32). Smith’s God-talk in his courtroom moment aligns with the tradition of language and hermeneutics that it sprang from. He was arguing against the injustice he faced on his own rhetorical terms. His assertion of his own godhood was a radical rhetorical version of theology that critiques both white and Black hegemony by

²⁰ Rhetorical theology maintains that all theology is at its core a form of argument placing emphasis on “how a speaker or writer situates language in order to persuade its hearers to a certain position” (A. Johnson 32) See A. Johnson’s “God is Negro.”

asking its audience to see God in the form of a Black person that is standing in front of them.

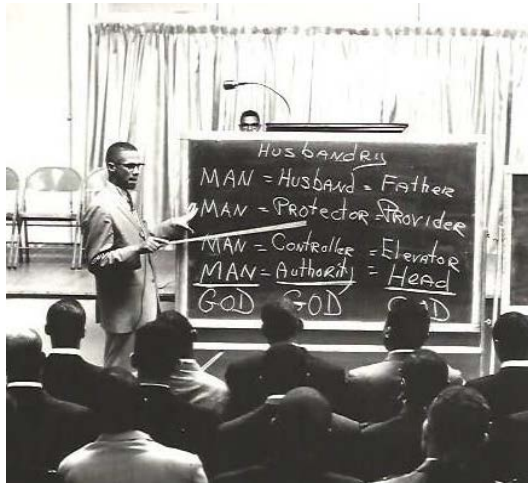


Figure 2. "Malcolm Teaching"



Figure 3. "Deconstructing 'Negro'"

Smith's rhetorical formulations about God and his use of the Black God trope are an inventive re-working of Muhammad's written theology, which he learned under Malcolm X's tutelage in Harlem's mosque no. 7 (See figure 2 and 3). Smith took specific "Lessons" from the Nation and divorced them of their "spook in the sky" theology. By "spook theology," he meant any reference to a god that is not a metaphor for actual human beings, thereby extending Muhammad's disdain for abstract deities, and ridding his Five Percent religious rhetoric of Biblical language that suggested belief in ghosts, spirits, or immaterial, inhuman higher powers. The term "spook theology" as used in Five Percent theology is taken from a critique of Christianity commonly laid out by the Nation of Islam explained in chapter 2. For Smith and the Five Percenters, the Black God trope

is directly transferred to the physical personage of Black people, rather than symbolic representation of them. Smith also does away with the moral admonishments and institutional guidelines of the Nation of Islam to make Muhammad's rhetoric more accessible. Smith's rhetoric was originally designed to appeal to Blacks who sympathized with the Nation of Islam, and Black Nationalism in some form, but were somehow unmoved to participate in the rigid institutional order of the Nation of Islam. His original audience were high school dropouts ranging in age from 14-20 years (Allah 99-100). The rhetorical imagery that makes their assertions logical to them are institutionalized within their discursive community and had been for over a century before Smith stood before the judge. Earlier manifestations of the Black God worked the trope differently than Smith's, but it is easy to paint a rhetorical history that offers the Five Percent Nation a precedent. Smith's Black God is in many ways a personal stylization of Henry McNeal Turner's "God is a Negro" statement. Both men are using the term "god" to signal a larger social meaning for the term than is usually denoted in traditional Christian usages of the word.

Smith's Five Percent theology is an embodied²¹ rhetoric that moves Muhammad's rhetoric from the private to the public sphere. Smith took the esoteric rhetoric taught in the closed system of the Muslim mosques and opened it up to high school dropouts in Harlem as language arts lessons taught on street corners and in front of local stores. The liturgy associated with the Five Percenters has to be read, memorized, and then re-spoken by initiates (Allah 97-99). This distinction is important because it not only separates

²¹ This position is in line with recent explorations into multimodal composition that view the practice as a curricular and extracurricular, wherein the body typically figures as a potential mode of meaning making. This view of embodied rhetoric acknowledges the role of the body in and especially for composing processes. See Rifenburg 2.

Smith and the Five Percent from the Nation of Islam, it demonstrates a different, yet similar, example of the Black God trope offering direct and indirect challenges to the sweep and scope of white and Black hegemony. The Five Percenters were trying to create a new style of Blackness, so they used their speech patterns and storytelling abilities as a means of expressing their new relationship to power in the United States. The style of delivery they use for their rhetoric offers insight into this multilayered discourse that blurs the line between text and embodied performance in the service of creating a new discourse community. The term “embodied rhetoric” as it is used here refers to what Michael Herzfeld calls “the materiality of the symbolic” (182). The Five Percent message is inseparable from the rhetoric inscribed within the Black bodies whom use it. Whereas Muhammad’s rhetoric in many ways seeks to overcome the limitations placed upon the Black body’s ability to speak on its own terms,²² Five Percent rhetoric embraces Black difference and uses it for rhetorical effect. Smith’s Black God trope challenges its audience to become prophetic rhetors themselves, rather than simply receivers of a prophet’s message, which is a strong distinction between it and other formulations of the trope that preceded it. In this sense, the rhetor becomes *nommo*, the word in action. *Nommo* is an African rhetorical concept researcher Richard L. Wright uses to trace word-meaning relationships in African-American rhetoric (relational dynamics). He believes African-American rhetoric is best analyzed at the performative level of its practice

²² See Jennifer Putzi 1-21, who foregrounds the “stigma of the marked black body” in her analysis of Pauline Hopkin’s Black nationalist novel *Contending Forces*.

because its use is as a telling a feature of its value as its intellectual form or aesthetic beauty:

The spoken word (released through human agency) is not merely an utterance skillfully manipulated, but rather an active force and companion to human activity, which gives life and efficacy to what it names or verbally affirms. In effect, the African principle of nommo acknowledges that the word is both generative substance and mystical force, which are activated in the rhetorical event. (85)

Wright's position is that the "western lexicographical approach to the word" used to evaluate and interpret other rhetorics is limiting in the context of understanding Smith and his movement. He suggests looking inside the word to determine how it helps the body with which it performs. Nommo's word-body relational dynamic can be transferred to written text. A closer look at the Smith's Black God trope reveals "the active presence of strong ideological and epistemic foundations regarding what it means" for a Black body "to be in the world and engage the world" (86). Nommo is useful because Smith's written rhetoric is "imbued with ideology (ways of thinking and believing) and epistemology (ways of knowing and relation to the world)" that are tied to the body that performs it and use religiously-inspired language to perform a "group-defining" function (86). The ideology in this case is reworked Black Muslim theology, expressed as enthymematic discourse about a Black God told by a Black person. The word-body relational dynamic as a terministic screen is fully realized in Smith's rhetoric through its

performance as enthymematic discourse. I am emphasizing enthymeme's²³ connection to the Black body here because Smith's rhetoric is rooted in a presumption that his audience is familiar with his method of realigning word-meaning associations. Enthymemes are designed to provide proof in speeches to people without engaging in complex arguments. They depend on nommo, a living word-body relational dynamic, kept alive by a shared language community. The audience can follow lines of reasoning that are presented in compressed form because they are trained in the symbols being used to signify meaning. An enthymeme argument is built on stringing together symbols that tap into the tacit knowledge and beliefs an audience hold, and these are usually only invoked implicitly in the argument itself. Enthymeme, in rhetorical theology, roots itself in the "common knowledge" of an audience that sees itself as a community formed around a particular body of religious knowledge. The image of the cross, for example, works enthymematically to tell a common knowledge story of not only Jesus but more importantly human hope, suffering, and tragedy. It often does this for audiences without the aid of any other direct signifier because the symbol itself is imbued with narrative mythos. The same can be said for the Star of David, Noah's Ark, or the image of Adam and Eve with an apple. These religious terms are imbued with ideology in their deep interpretive structures. The Five Percenters use the Black body in a similar fashion. They juxtapose the deep embedded logic of Christian symbols with the cultural stereotypes and critiques of African-Americans embedded in the performance of the Black body.

²³ Classic definitions of the term are rooted in oratory, which serve the purpose of this dissertation, but more modern notions of the term use it in composition studies as well. I use the term to describe argumentation in both spoken and written rhetoric.

This type of “rhetorical theology” places emphasis on how a speaker or writer “situates” religious language to persuade an audience to their position (A. Johnson, “God Is Negro” 29). In this case, the Five Percenters are rhetors who must situate their religious language within their performance of the Black body. By maintaining that all theology is at its core a form of argument, Andre Johnson delineates this type of public theology (praxis) from systematic theology (theory), claiming that Black Nationalist rhetors like Smith are engaging in a form of social gospel delivered to an audience that sees itself as marginalized and has a contextual aim to rid themselves of their perceived oppression (32). Johnson’s definition of public theology is useful for reading Smith’s Black God trope in the performance of adherents because it helps show how the Five Percenters themselves become a part of the text for audience members. The texts require the speaker and audience to critically rethink and engage the surface features of the story being told and assess their relationship to the deep structures of the language used to articulate the speaker’s social position. The Black body performing the text reinforces this lesson. The texts mixed with the performance create an in-group discourse that liberates through its performance.

A popular culture example of Five Percenter public performance comes from rapper Anthony “AZ” Cruz, who tells audience members of his childhood growing up a Five Percenter. The goal of the rhetoric, as it is posited in the following examples, is not to convert audience members, rather it seems to be merely introducing Five Percent parlance and worldview to a wider audience. Although not directly addressed, the “120 Lessons” are infused in his speech, and are evidenced in his ability to send Five Percent

messages enthymematically. AZ's speech is designed to teach a historical and moral lesson to his intended rap audience from a contemporary African-American perspective. Like the "120 Lessons," he must rely on verbal eloquence to deliver his truncated message. As it is with most hip-hop discourse, this story uses an implied "I" narrative to situate the author into the story, thereby aiding to create its coherence for audience members who have little contextual information outside the narrator's "I" to hold together the information they are being presented with. In rap, the prophetic persona of the author is usually always stated or implied as the narrator:

We were beginners, in a hood of Five Percenters, but something must of got in us, because all of us turned to sinners. Some resting in peace, and some are sitting in San Quentin. Others such as myself are trying to carry on tradition. Keeping the effervescence of street ghetto essence inside us, because it provides us, with the proper insight to guide us. (qtd. in Nas)

The hood AZ discusses is his childhood home in Brooklyn in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. The neighborhood acts as a rhetorical stand-in for Black neighborhoods across the country. His enthymematic speech uses the Biblical term "sinners" to signify his position in the crack epidemic and war on drugs and to promote Five Percent rhetoric and relate it to other African-Americans negatively influenced by poverty and crime. He inverts the traditional Christian use of the term, preferring rather to think of his contemporaries as fallen instead of born corrupted. The couplet "Some resting in peace, some are sitting in San Quentin" is a critique of the prison industrial complex and how the American justice system disproportionally targeted African-American men during '70s, '80s, and '90s.²⁴ It

²⁴ See *The 13th*. Directed by Ava DuVernay.

also denotes the narrow life options for many poor African-Americans. The use of “we” and “us” connects him both to the characters in his story and the audience members listening. His brief story tells how the Five Percent lessons help him survive life in a world where death and jail are everyday life possibilities. The line “other such as myself are trying to carry on tradition,” places him in the prophetic tradition, offering a third righteous option that precludes death or incarceration.

Another popular culture example comes from the performance of Five Percent rhetoric by R&B artist Erykah Badu, in her debut single “On and On:”

Peace and blessings manifest with every lesson learned,
If your knowledge were your wealth then it would be well earned
If we were made in his image then call us by our names
Most intellects do not believe in God but they fear us just the same ...
Oh on and on and on and on (my cypher keeps moving like a rolling stone) ...
I was born under water with three dollars and six dimes
Yeah you might laugh, because you did not do your math ...

Badu cleverly uses Five Percent signifying to deliver her Black God message. For instance, the line “If we were made in his image then call us by our names” is a voicing of the Five Percent’s Black Man is God thesis. Similarly, the line “I was born under water with three dollars and six dimes” is a double entendre reference to being born “poor” (under water) but remaining a teacher. “Three dollars and six dimes” means three-hundred and sixty degrees of knowledge and the ability to teach. The second meaning for the line is more explicitly Five Percent. “Born” is “B,” the second letter in the Supreme Alphabet. It means to come into the knowledge of self, which the rest of the line would seem to support because three dollars and sixty cents is also three hundred and sixty

pennies. Knowledge is a 360-degree circle, in Five Percent parlance. The terms “cypher” and “math” as they are used in the song are also context clues as to the presence of the Five Percent’s Black God trope. A cypher is also 360 degrees of knowledge, and math is the “120 Lessons.” Badu verifies this reading in her 1997 *Live* recording of the song.

A shared Black Muslim theology undergirds the logic of both texts and assumes audience members are familiar with the relationships the stories refer to, as well as the terminology of the Five Percent Nation. In the Five Percent schema, the Nation of Islam’s exposition of Yacub and Fard are a systematic theology, and Smith’s Black God is an example of that system put into praxis. Smith and his adherents are engaged in the praxis of a prophetic public theology – becoming a new type of rhetor – similar to the shift attested to by Malcolm X and other members of the Nation of Islam who became ministers, but without the veneer of Black middle-class respectability. Of this type of prophetic rhetoric, A. Johnson says that it “is discourse grounded in the sacred” and “rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals they espoused” (“Prophetic” 271). It is a “rhetoric that dedicates itself to the rights of individuals, especially the poor, marginalized, and exploited members of society” (271). In addition, its position on the margins allows this rhetorical theology to “lift the people to an ethical conception of whatever the people deem sacred, by adopting” a controversial style of speaking (271). In other words, the speaker assumes a position of having special knowledge and shares this with her or his audience, and it becomes the speaker/prophet’s job to disclose the previously hidden. Notably, Smith’s tradition never questions the

presuppositions of its own epistemic position (Black Muslim theology) or the chosen status of its target audience. As Smith's ascent into the public spotlight demonstrates, his embodied rhetoric was inevitably caught up in the sweep of human history that set the context for his rhetoric and ethos in the moment it was first delivered. Historical distance and a critical understanding of rhetoric and racism allows for Smith's Black God to be analyzed within the context of its communicative aims.

Smith's new Black cultural worldview is expressed through his rhetoric about God, and the way it is to be employed. The God he creates through the performance of tropological language is an expression of his "Black" identity, or worldview viz-a-viz the "white" identity of American life and politics. The hidden history of Africans in America as he understands it is buried in his words, and it is structured in his rhetoric to appeal to an audience who wants to know and understand the history of Africans in America, including the historical antagonisms of Black and white race relations in America. In this Black Nationalist discourse, words like "God" and "Devil" are used to signify with little context or interpretation for the uninitiated, the deeper story of African struggle in the Americas. The deeper meaning of these words is not evident on their surface but shines through implicitly for those who know how to read the surface contours of the language utterance about God for the deeper meaning within them. For example, the teachings of the Five Percenters show themselves in this position statement from the Nation of the Gods and Earths, a movement within the Five Percent nation:

We *teach* that Black People are the Original People of the planet earth.
We *teach* that Black People are the Fathers and Mothers of Civilization.
We *teach* that the Science of Supreme Mathematics is the key to understanding

Man's relationship to the universe.

We *teach* Islam as a natural way of life, not a religion.

We *teach* that each one should reach one, according to their knowledge.

We *teach* that the Black `Man is God and his proper name s ALLAH. ARM LEG
LEG ARM HEAD.

We *teach* that our children are our link to the future and must be nurtured:
respected, loved, protected and educated.

We *teach* that the unified Black family is the vital building block of the Nation.
(Black 3)

The author's emphasis on teaching highlights the performative aspects of the group's rhetoric, echoing their claim to be "poor righteous teachers" sent to undue the teachings of the Ten Percent. In this vein of speech, Five Percent rhetoric is active and didactic through its movement from one person to another. The didactic elements of Black Nationalist religious rhetoric help bring the rhetor closer to his/her characters and their audience by fostering a private conversation between the two.²⁵ Essentially, Five Percenters are creating an in-group rhetoric that links their new worldview to that of their intended audience's old worldview. The assumption is that the rhetor can relate new information (a personal God) using familiar concepts (Jesus, the Devil, Moses, and Fard) to do so.

Michelene Chi and Kurt VanLehn articulate the Five Percenter's assumption in their educational psychology study "Seeing Deep Structure from the Interactions of Surface Features." They propose that knowledge transfer occurs when individuals "see" what is the same in the deep structure between new target problems and a previously encountered source problems, even when the surface features of the problems seems

²⁵ Although more than one audience member can engage in the discursive exchange, as a reader or listener, each audience member experiences the rhetoric of Black Nationalism individually.

dissimilar (181). The Moses narrative quoted below, for example, is different than the Biblical narrative of Moses but the message of Black unity underlying Smith's version of the narrative allows initiated audience members to recognize the message in the story using their connection to deep features in both stories that are similar as clues to do so. For example, Moses as a tropological figure points to social critique because that is how he is used as a rhetorical figure in other genres of writing.

The rhetoric of Five Percent theology is unashamedly rhetorical. Black and white are not skin color categories; they are rhetorical positions. Like Muhammad, the words "Black" and "white" point to personal character or ethos in Five Percent rhetoric. The racialized physiology commonly associated with the terms in American rhetoric are deemphasized. Of course, physical description is the basis of any racialized language in the United States, but Smith's rhetoric emphasizes what Charles Chesnutt and others articulated before him: biological definitions of whiteness or Blackness are incomplete and overdetermined. Black people in America run the skin color spectrum, and the category of "white" expands and contracts over time and with context.

Smith believed in a cyclical relationship between words and the material world similar to that implied by Kenneth Burke's lament about the failure of action in the form of language to capture the real experience which language pretends to signify (48). Both acknowledge that although language fails to capture literal action, there is nothing beyond language to capture the apprehension of action's essence, the lived moment. People must rely on language, as untrustworthy of a narrator as it can be, to discuss the human condition. Smith's theology echoes Burke, asserting in practice that language not

only discusses the human condition, it creates new forms of it. Like Burke's logology,²⁶ and nommo, Smith's Five Percent theology extols the interior possibility of surface language. Smith's interior shuffling of surface language is indicative of the movement the Black God trope denotes.

For the Five Percenters, changing God into a Black man and Black woman was designed to inspire personal responsibility, creativity, and critical thinking in its audience. As author Pen Black explains,

We ... teach our brothers and sisters knowledge of self and surroundings. We teach so that we, as a whole, can raise ourselves out of this abyss we call Black America. As always, first comes the word, then the informed action leading toward elevation of our mental and physical conditions. We bring the word as knowledge of self (4).

Coming up with a symbol system to support the idea that God was Black required creative and critical thinking and rhetoric. The Five Percent ethos is founded on the belief and practice that human society is made up in part by the words used to define experience. The oppressed changing the words they use in reference to define their experience also changes their perception of and action within society in relationship to power, especially if the word formations that they are using are geared towards those ends. This is the logic operating in Five Percent rhetoric.

²⁶ "Logology is the systematic study of theological terms, not from the standpoint of their truth or falsity as statements about the supernatural, but purely in the light the might throw on the *forms* of meaning," see Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion* 47.

The “120 Lessons”²⁷ Challenges the Language of White Supremacy

The Five Percenters use written and spoken rhetoric as a pathway to resistance and liberation. In the rhetoric of Smith and the Five Percenters is an intentional undermining of western culture's grand narrative, meaning the centrality of whites (males in particular) and the philosophical culture which insulates their continued dominance over American life. The Black bodies who are passing the culture around orally are central to the protest of the rhetoric. The subject as a subject to “the white man’s” higher authority disappears within the confines of Five Percent rhetoric and is proven by the way the rhetors use their Five Percent rhetoric. The group’s code-switching discourse is an intentional reordering of word-meaning relationships. The process is designed to mirror the reordered relationship between God and man and Blacks and whites within the schema of Five Percent theology. In Christian theology, the relationship between God and man is a partnership between a superior (God/Jesus) and an inferior (humans). Five Percent theology views the relationship between God and man as a unity, rather than a hierarchal partnership. This partnership mirrors the relationship between surface words and deeper meaning in Five Percent discourse. There is no separation of English language use and the plight of the Black body in America. Every time a Black voice speaks, a history of racism, slavery, segregation and discrimination is heard explicitly or implicitly. For many Five Percenters, changing the way they talk about God not only re-orientates their position to language but also gives them a tool to combat the racism that made

²⁷ The text here is quoted from *Supreme 120 Lessons* independently published by The Department of Supreme Wisdom. The independent publishing history of this text creates the historical problem that there are multiple versions of the document. Some differ slightly in word choice or text arrangement.

language a threat to African-Americans in the first place. They are co-creators of the English language rather than mere subjects to its harsh unchanging rules.

Five Percenters use their Black bodies to take back control of their language use symbolically reaffirming for initiates the ability to seize back control of their lives from their perceived oppressors. Like the Nation of Islam, the Five Percenters reject the premises of racism and integrationist discourses as false “tricknology,” attempting to provide adherents with psychological space to create an alternate reality that demands self-agency. Tricknology, or trick knowledge, is a term used in Black Muslim parlance to denote the laws, rules, education, aesthetics, history, wisdom, knowledge, etc. forced upon African-Americans as a result of African enslavement in America. In the Nation of Islam, tricknology is supplanted with Islam and Muhammad. Five Percent teaching shifts Muhammad’s hermeneutic toward humanism. As an interpretive theology, it focuses on the power of a complete shift from talking about God as a distant out-of-body being to a personalization of the image of God as contained within the individual. Smith assumes that people experience a majority of their lives inside their own heads via the narratives they have learned about the world and themselves. With this outlook, Smith uses religious rhetoric to create a counter-culture American narrative for the oppressed as he knew them. An examination of Smith’s Five Percent Nation in relationship to the Blacks religiously-inspired beliefs²⁸ as rhetoric illustrates that Smith keenly understood the power of religious linguistic symbols as tools used for “meaning making.”

²⁸ It should be noted that many within the Five Percent movement reject the appellation “religion” in reference to their belief system, preferring “science” or “philosophy” to emphasize its decolonized hermeneutic. Here the term religion is used interchangeably with the term “philosophy,” giving acknowledgment to both perspectives within the group’s worldview.

The “120 Lessons” are a part of the Five Percenter’s founding narrative.²⁹ The teachings illustrate how Smith appropriated the Nation of Islam’s rhetoric to create and propagate the ethos of his new language group. The “120 Lessons,” in its style, arrangement, performance, and audience behaves as an enthymeme that allows deeper meaning to be voiced as a rhetoric of resistance within a text (Phillipson 40). Smith set up a pedagogy rooted in rhetorical exercises aimed at sharpening initiates verbal eloquence, invention, and critical thinking skills. His students, in turn, used his teachings to proselytize others through their performance of the rhetoric with one another (Allah 99-101). This approach points to a deep engagement by Smith and the Five Percenters with the material body as a rhetorical means and medium for resistance to white racist oppression. In addition, the Five Percenters use language about a Black God to attack core assumptions of Black inferiority and instill various forms of in-group identity in members of their language community. The following excerpted examples demonstrate how the “120 Lessons” training uses surface terms about a Black God and the Devil to describe larger truths relevant to American racism at that time. Five Percent rhetoric intentionally realters the relational positions of America’s Black/white binary changing the subject meanings of the terms used to explicate their narrative. Smith’s theology draws on the super images of God, the Devil, Yacub, the white man, and the Self to create a new rhetorical position for Blacks linguistically and materially.

²⁹ The “120 Lessons” are a part of the Universal Language of Black Muslims inside and outside the Nation of Islam. The Five Percent added *Supreme Mathematics* to the Universal Language but other components are taken from the Nation of Islam. See Allah 98-100.

“English Lesson No. 1 (1-36)” challenges white racism and Christian hegemony in a series of 36 propositions and questions that draws on a fictionalized story of Wallace Fard Muhammad to create a new foundational myth about the meaning of the Black experience in America.³⁰ Fard was the co-founder of the Nation of Islam, and a quasi-messianic figure in its narrative cycle. In the Five Percenter’s myths, Fard is a symbolic self, or stand-in for the Supreme Being Black Man and Woman who possess knowledge of self. His “uncle” is the “so-called Negro” of North America who is “deaf, dumb, and blind” to the knowledge of the Blacks’ true divine identity. This last point is crucial for understanding what separates the Five Percenters from the Nation of Islam, whose language they co-opt almost verbatim. In Five Percent theology, God as something other than human discourse and material potential is preposterous and is characterized as “trick knowledge,” a fabrication designed to take personal power away from the individual. Humans create experience, and expression of that creation is most visibly expressed through language. Christian stories told and retold through and *as* language have shaped the way human history has played out, and the only way to alter history is to claim agency over the words that bring it to life, recognizing one’s own personal power to influence the behavior of large groups through symbolic meaning associations. For the Five Percent, meaning is the central concern of an utterance.³¹

³⁰ I have tried to maintain the syntax, grammar, sentence structure, and (where appropriate for context) pagination of the text as it is propagated to highlight its distance from mainstream editorial conventions. The non-conformist style of Five Percent prose is a part of its rhetorical ethos.

³¹ “An utterance embodies both linguistic and metalinguistic elements. Not only are words and syntax instrumental but also the context and environment of the utterance which includes the social and cultural belief, practices, and processes,” see Myers 17.

This passage is a series of propositions to be memorized. Within its framework, certain words have the ability to create fields of implied meaning that guide audience understanding, what Burke calls “terministic screens” (45). These fields allow rhetors to engage in an enthymematic – or truncated – discourse with their audience. These “super terms” draw upon “super images”³² embedded into the collective imagination of large groups of people, who respond to them in various ways for various reasons. By “fields” I mean groups of associative meanings. For instance, invoking the name “Moses” brings to the Western imagination a discursive field of characters, moral meanings, and relational logics that help provide a vessel or guideposts for new information to be added and substituted to make meaning. Smith’s rhetoric is intentionally using super images as a tool of persuasion so that people respond to the Black Nationalist messages delivered in this manner.

In “English Lesson No.1” the word “Islam,” for instance, becomes a symbol for “I. Self. Lord. Am. Master.” “Muslims” are the stolen children of Africa, who were made slaves in the “Wilderness of North America,” but have remembered who they are. Another symbol, the term “Allah” is the rough equivalent of human: “arm,” “leg,” “head.” “My uncle” is a term used for Black Americans who have not remembered who they were. The term “uncle” may also have ancestral connotations, in that the term is an honorific among many traditional African cultures. The “Devil” is the metaphoric white man, which is not so much a reference to a person or people as it is the entirety of white

³² These two terms correspond to Bakhtin’s “Superaddressee” and “hero/topic” dialogic domains respectively. Super terms are addressed to a superaddressee. Similarly, super images are broad hero/topics that are relative universals.

supremacy as a material phenomenon. The white man is not bound by skin color distinctions either but is better associated with the term “Ten Percent,” who Black Muslims call, “rich, slave makers of the poor.” These slave makers have an exploitative mentality embodied in the use of the word “trader,” which is a reference to Europeans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the penultimate example of the depths to which humanity’s unchecked immorality can sink. The Black Muslims claim that the traders are the cultural and biological descendants of Yacub, the big head scientist, who is himself a Black man, a nod to the biological oneness and yet cultural separateness of human societies.

The “English Lesson” is a critique of African-American’s relationship to white Western culture and its aesthetic logic. There are thirty-six propositions in the “English Lesson” but the Black God trope is most active in propositions 2-14 because they are an enthymematic discussion of Black history:

1. My name is W. F. Muhammad.
2. I came to North America by myself.
3. My uncle was brought over here by the trader 379 years ago.
4. My uncle does not speak his own language.
5. He does not know that he is my uncle.
6. He likes the devil because the devil gives him nothing.
7. Why does he like the devil?
8. Because the devil planted fear in him when he was a little boy.
9. Why does he fear the devil now that he is a grown man?
10. Because the devil taught him how to eat the wrong food.
11. Does that have anything to do with the above question?
12. Yes Sir. That makes him other than his ownself.
13. What is his ownself?
14. His ownself is a righteous Muslim. (Department 25)

This excerpt demonstrates that the power relationship between Black and white Americans is re-negotiated within Five Percent rhetoric through the use of God as a trope. According to Five Percent lore, Africans were “tricked” into slavery rather than being forced into it by the strength and intelligence of Europeans. Read this way, the violently unequal American power relationships coded as race are predicated on a deceptive weakness in whites instead of the biological superiority of European races. It also points again to Yacub as a trickster figure, leading the historical deception of Africans.

Proposition 1 establishes God’s dominion over the narrative by introducing Fard as its subject. This move establishes the prophetic ethos of the text that follows. Fard is a stand-in for the Black self and, as protagonist of the narrative, is placed at its head as an embodiment of God to invoke self-agency. Proposition 2 further exemplifies this notion with its use of the phrase, “I came to America by myself,” which is an allusion to pre-Columbus exploration and settlement of what becomes the Americas by African Moors and destabilizes the notion that Europe is the founder of global exploration. This destabilizing sets the intended audience up for the suggestion of becoming independent from white American society and its racist aesthetic. Propositions 3-5, reinforce this idea by stating that “my uncle,” the metaphoric slave ancestor, has lost his memory due to his encounter with the trader 379 years-ago. The negative implications of this lapse in memory is brought to bear in the story with the abrupt insertion of “the Devil” in points 6-10, with the questions in 7 and 9 being essential, reminding the initiate and audience that the Black/white power dynamic in America is a web of well-told lies that have been

acted out through material bodies. Why are supposedly righteous people letting evil rule over them? The answer is in points 6 and 8, because they have been conditioned into fearing their rulers. In question 9, the word “food” is a double entendre, meaning both literal food³³ and mental food, as in food for thought: again, pointing toward the performative aspects of the material Black body through eating. Propositions 10-12 are admonitions against ingesting pork and white western culture, both figuratively and literally. Pork is, in this schema, a symptom and cause of the white man’s psychological disease.

The propositions of “English Lesson No.1” demonstrate how the subject as a subject to “the white man’s” authority disappears in the text by encouraging (even forcing) the reader to embrace a new historical and religious narrative. The reordered word-meaning relationships in the text are designed not only to have a disorientating/reorientating effect on its intended audience but also to be impenetrable by non-initiates.³⁴ The requirement that the lessons be memorized through either oral or written transmission and repeated in public on demand also provides initiates a discursive community away from whites, their religion, and by extension their aesthetics. For initiates learning the lessons in 1965, and even today, the esoteric nature of the catechism creates an in-group/out-group connection with the text and those who understand it that

³³ Pork is a primary dietary restriction for Black Muslims. The diet is a very serious marker of affiliation.

³⁴ The core lessons of the Five Percenters were originally only intended for the eyes of African-Americans who had actually joined the Nation of Islam. When Smith brought the lessons out of the mosque, the target audience remained primarily African-American, but they were also learned by Latin Americans and whites. “Initiates” as it is used here includes all who can interpret the lessons.

aids in its ability to persuade and liberate. The absence in Smith's propositions of any direct reference to a high God figure or white people, though they are implied actors in the narrative, provides the intellectual and religious space for initiates to rethink and re-see the white social hierarchy as false. The "fear" planted in Muhammad's uncle is the story of the white retributive high God in Christianity, as well as the violence of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Thus, Smith's initiates are able to embrace the suggestion that they are God in mind, body, and soul, as an alternative to both Christian and Muslim teachings to this time.

A second example comes from "Lost-Found Muslim Lesson No. 1 (1-14)." This series of questions and answers underscores the performative aspects of the rhetoric examined in the "English Lesson." The structure of the lesson reifies the import of the body enacted through Five Percent rhetoric. The answering of one's own question that takes place in the lessons highlights the wisdom contained in the speaker: knowledge of self. Six of the fourteen points in this lesson offer the best examples of the realignment of the surface structure of language and its deep cultural content in Five Percent theology. Again, Biblical terms like Devil, Moses, and Jacob are transfigured here and given new meanings that direct the hearers to the Five Percent's path to freedom. Although this catechism bears language similar to those found in Christian and Islamic lore no direct correlations exist for much of the content contained in this narrative discourse in either religious system.³⁵ Moses and Jacob, for instance, are given Arabic titles, Musa and Yacub, but this is not done to tell the Quranic story of these Biblical figures. Instead the

³⁵ For a sociological history of Muhammad's rhetorical invention, see Lincoln 94-129.

familiar figures are given new back stories that fit them into human history differently. They open up a new conversation about humanity aligned with the African-American experience. Read from the perspective of the Black God trope, a clear in-group conversation in the text not readily accessible to the casual reader becomes apparent.

Question 1 critiques Eurocentrism. Several super terms point to an inverted power relationship between racialized human beings. The speaker asks, “Why isn't the devil settled on the best part of the planet Earth?” and then answers his/her own question by responding:

Because the earth belongs to the original man and knowing that the devil is weak and wicked there would not be any peace among them. So he was put them out on the worst part and kept the best part preserved for himself ever since he made it. The best part is in Arabia at the Holy City of Mecca. The colored man or Caucasian [sic] man is the devil. Arabia is in the Far East and is bordered by the Indian Ocean on the south side. (Department 12)

“The best part of the Earth” is what is called “Africa” in English. The “worst part” is Europe, and by extension, North and South America after European settlement. Africa and Europe are synecdochal substitutes for Black and white people in addition to being geo-temporal spaces. The answer is an enthymematic allusion to the Yacub (Jacob) myth of creation (see chapter 2). In the narrative whites are often signified by the mention of the name Yacub. The white’s migration from Africa to Europe was forced, and they created the trans-Atlantic slave trade from Europe back to Africa and then the Americas as retribution for their exile. Arabia and Asia, in this discourse, are metaphors for an expanded geographic rendering of Africa. The term “Asiatics” or “Black Asiatics” used in this catechism ambiguously refers to all the people of Africa, Europe, South America

and Asia as an un-demarcated whole. The idea is that modern geopolitical formations name themselves as separate Nations now due to the “trick knowledge of the devils” or rather the European encounter with the rest of the world. Historically, Africa is the cradle of all human civilization, and Europeans are late comers to the human family vengefully warring against a personal insecurity in reference to the rest of the world.

Question 2 is similarly structured and is important because its subject, “Musa,” is an invented rendering of the Biblical figure Moses, designed to reconfigure material power-relationships. The speaker asks, “Why did Musa (Moses) have a hard time civilizing the devil in the year 2,000 B.C.?” The answer is “Because he (the Devil) was a savage.” The question and answer invert the historical power relationships of Western culture by placing Africa into a rhetorically superior position to Europe using Moses and the devil as representative figures to do so. Characterizing Moses (i.e. a “civilized” Black man) as virtuous because of his connection to Africa, not a disembodied high-God, and implying Europeans as Devils, the narrative invokes a new relationship between Africa, the Black body, and human value within the Biblical text as well as the discourse of the communicants engaged in the exchange. Questions 1 and 2, presuppose the answers to 6-8. But 6-8 deserve brief attention because they attack the heart of Eurocentrism and highlight the use of narrative inversion in the text. For instance, in Question 7: “Why does the devil teach and keep our people so illiterate?” the answer, “So that he can use them as a tool and also a slave. He keeps them blind to themselves so that he can master them” signals an ‘us’ against ‘them’ in-group problem that can be seemingly solved by its as yet unrecognized existence (Department 13). Saying that “the devil teaches illiteracy”

is a pregnant statement that cuts two ways to make its point. On the one hand, emphasizing that the devil is teaching fear voices concern over whites' complete domination of all discourse considered discourse, instruction, and necessary to history and communication. On the other hand, touting literacy as illiteracy echoes Carter G. Woodson's lament that an American education leaves Negroes unfit to do anything for themselves save what whites say it is appropriate to do.

Questions 6 and 8 buttress this perspective in that they both create a history for Black and white social relationships that runs counter to the historical narrative of those social groups as set in place by the rhetoric of white superiority:

6. Why does the devil call our people Africans?

Ans. To make our people of North America believe that the people of that continent are the only people that they have and that they are all savages. He bought a trading post in the jungles of that continent. The original people live on that continent. They are the ones who strayed away from civilization and are living a jungle life. The original people call the continent Asia but the devil calls it Africa to try and divide us. He wants to make us think that we are all different. (Department 12)

Calling Africa into question in this way repositions Black subjectivity on a fundamental level and also rhetorically upends white Eurocentric dominance of discourse. The statement implies bias in even Europe's right to name the people and places of the earth. Question 8 furthers the rhetorical assault by adding a moralistic motive to unite against the divisions caused by race:

8. Why does the devil keep our people apart from his social equality?

Ans. Because he does not want us to know how filthy he is in all of his affairs. He is afraid because when we learn about him we will run him from among us. Social

means to advocate a society of men or group of men for one common cause. Equality means to be equal in everything. (13)

Each question and answer is designed to give the audience and rhetor a new perspective on the power-relationship between the Black and white races throughout history. The impact of this inversion is doubly weighted for the speakers because they are required to commit the facts of this story to memory in order to recite it, and later incorporate it into their own speech form, whereas audience members are only weighed-down by the facts contained in the speech to the degree that they are listening, interested, understanding, and accepting of the message.

Question 4 underscores the relationship between the surface-level features of this text and the deep level discourse outlined above by creating a new story of Moses and Europe as it attempts to explain why the relationship exists in the first place. The author asks in a series:

Why did we run Yacub (Jacob) and his made devil from the root of civilization over the hot Arabian Desert into the caves of West Asia as they now call it Europe? What is the meaning of Eu and Rope? How long ago? What did the devil bring with him? What kind of life did he live? And how long before Musa came to teach them of their forgotten trick knowledge? (Department 11-12)

The answer is blatantly polemic and ideology-laden, making Europe the antagonistic enemy of “the righteous people”:

Because they started making trouble among the righteous people accusing the righteous people of telling lies causing them to fight and kill one another. Yacub was an original man and the father of the devil. He taught them to do this devilishment. The root of civilization is in Arabia at the Holy City of Mecca which means where the knowledge and wisdom of the original man started when

the planet was first founded. We ran the devil over the hot Arabian Desert. We took from them everything except their language and made them walk every step of the way. It was twenty-two hundred miles. They went savage and lived in the caves of Europe. Eu means hillsides and Rope is the rope to bind in. It was 6,019 years ago. Musa came 2,000 years later and taught them how to live a respectful life, how to build a home for themselves and some of the forgotten trick knowledge that Yacub taught them which was devilishment - telling lies, stealing and how to master the original man. Musa was a half-original man and a prophet who was predicted by the 23 scientists in the year 1. 15,019 years ago from the date of this writing. (12)

In all these questions and answers of this lesson, white superiority is subverted through rhetorical inversion of real-world power relationships. But in 4, this point is made explicit. Rather than being the progenitors of Blacks and civilizations, Caucasians (who are *colored*) are the children of Africans. Rather than being the human incarnations of God, whites are the devil. Rather than Europe being the cradle of human civilization, it is the home of the troublemakers. This inversion makes room for a type of discursive liberation that cannot be discounted in its use or usefulness as a survival tool of the oppressed. Beyond maintaining psychic grounding, the practice creates real challenges to the unquestioned authority of white hegemony.

Smith's appropriation of the "Lessons" from the Nation of Islam's rhetoric is emblematic of his emphasis on imitation, mimicry, invention, and performance ("show and prove") in his use of a Black God trope. The system Smith setup was not a religious cult dedicated to hating white people or a street gang built on a system of self-aggrandizement, it was a rhetorical training program.³⁶ The "120 Lessons" functions as a

³⁶ Both views are espoused by the Federal Bureau of Corrections who have to monitor the group's presence as an inmate gang and as a protected religious organization, in many cases.

rhetical exercise that the Five Percent Nation uses to train new devotees. Smith arranged eight lessons that students must memorize verbatim, and in sequence, before they learn a new lesson. Acolytes memorize, recite, and re-present Five Percent theology as a modeled form of instruction. They are taught the lessons through imitating the performance of fellow members. Once the lessons are learned the new member can build on the lesson and recite with other devotees to keep the lessons fresh in their memory. The lessons operate as a shorthand for layers of meaning within the Five Percent community. Mimicry and invention are paramount in the process of the Five Percenters building with one another in a cipher about the lessons. “Building” is talking, or more broadly interacting positively, with other members. A “cipher” is a circle of knowledge, or communication network, a code known only to those in the community. The continued in-group conversation transmitted through the “120 Lessons,” replete with esoteric meanings, serves to strengthen communal ties by giving communicators space to retreat away from white and Black societies into a space that is literally of their own making because of its reliance on performance and invention. The practice, process, and rhetorical culture of the Five Percenters is the source of its liberating potential.

Five Percent Challenge to Race-Based Religious Rhetoric

Smith and the Five Percenters represent a shift in Black hermeneutics, from thinking and talking about God in the abstract to a personalization of the image of a God. This shift inspired a change in the way the Black God was expressed. In the Five Percent rhetoric, God is a Black person, not just the symbolic figure of one. This allows the rhetoric to escape biological Blackness to create an ontological Blackness. Blackness is

not a biological mark of inferiority or source of social stigma; it is an outlook on life that sees the self in harmony while in opposition to society. It also affords the rhetor a means of personalizing God. This reshaping of the signifier-signified relationship, in what is known as “god talk,” is a rhetorical reinvention of what it means to be a human being in America (A. Johnson 32). For Five Percenters, seizing upon a new representational style of God is tantamount to claiming a sense of voice and agency far too long denied them. Smith’s cryptic God talk and the rhetoric that it spawned from are a written and oral tradition that engender a new sense of being in a hostile racist world. The ethos of the rhetor and the audience who may become engaged in the rhetoric are changed by their contact with story contained in the lessons. The “building” process, or talking about these “lessons,” contributes to the knowledge of the ever-growing language community, as well as the individual looking to express a new social outlook on the world. Within the vernacular of the Five Percenters countless everyday numerical and linguistic symbols are willfully given new meaning, in an attempt for the speakers and hearers of it to redefine themselves and the world that surrounds them. According to this line of thinking, the personalization of God is designed to reprogram the humans that create the world’s meaning, namely African-Americans who were taught that they were inferior.

Na'im Akbar explains the logic behind this methodology in his book *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*: “Once you begin to believe that the deity [God/Jesus] is somebody other than you, then you are put into a psychologically dependent state that renders you incapable of breaking loose until you break the hold of that image” (61). Akbar’s assertion draws a direct correlation between the divine ultimate (or “the deity”)

and the cognitive self. His belief is that a person's internal image of their ultimate deity influences (positively or negatively) their self-esteem. And that, in more racial terms, if a person's God looks like them, they feel more secure about their place in this world and, by inference, are better fit to take control of their individual and communal life (61-62). Akbar's observation echoes the Black Muslim critique of the Black church and Christianity as tools of white supremacy. It also echoes in Smith's theology to the point that skin color does not define race in Smith's words the same way it does with Akbar.

Beyond its surface appearances, the racial rhetoric of the Five Percenters is surprisingly inclusive. In an unpublished manuscript, a white Five Percenter named Azreal tells of his conversion after meeting Smith in Matawan mental institution:

I had been searching for the truth most of my life when I met the Father (Smith), and I knew that is all he was about. I want the Gods and Earths, who never met Allah, the Father to know he did not teach a Devil in Matawan, he taught a righteous man.

He gave me my name Azreal "The Angel of Death" in charge of inhabitants of Hell, who can come and go as he pleases, whose job it is to get the wrong doers to reveal who they are. So when I see a "God," who calls me a Devil based on seeing me on face value, they are just telling me what they are (qtd in Allah 176).

In 1967, when the two met, this type of social outlook was revolutionary. Azreal demonstrates both in his membership and understanding of his affiliation that the rhetoric of the Five Percent Nation moves beyond conventional forms of race within the confines of its own logic.

Since Smith's death, the Five Percent theology has splintered into numerous Five Percent theologies (Allah 290-301). But this is not a defeat of Smith's mission. Rather, it

is a continuation of his goal to rid his people of a closed religious system full of prescriptions and prohibitions that limit human agency in shaping the contours of civil society and more proof that Smith inspired rhetorical invention and critical engagement in his target audience. Five Percent historian Wakeel Allah, in the first volume of his book *In the Name of Allah*, explains the contemporary diversity of Five Percent philosophies and the ways this diversity proves that “diversity” in the form of individuals developing the ability to think and act for themselves within the corporate structure of the United States is what Smith sought with his theology (290). This is what Smith’s attempt to unseat the Black church’s hegemony over Black social and intellectual culture should look like:

As it is with any group of human beings, the Five Percenters are not a monolithic society. With the advent of the new millennium the contemporary Five Percent have engaged in discussion and debates on the theology of the movement. As a result, different schools of thought were brought to the surface within the movement. Since the Five Percenters pride themselves on being free and independent thinkers, the different schools of thought within the movement sometimes can be as numerous as its members. (290)

Another Five Percent historian, Prince Allah Cuba elaborates on these ideas in his book *Our Mecca is Harlem*:

... to experience Five Percenters does not require learning anything that is clothed in mystery. There is no spook god or doctrine to learn. All the brothers know that they are “gods.” And the sisters know they are earths. Individual Five Percenters study the rudiments of “the lessons” in a perpetual pursuit of the ways and means to be that they know themselves to be. In other words, the objective is to master the creative process by which they and the world has created. (124)

Free thought, leading to independent group action against a status quo that promotes human inequality is the rhetorical agenda. This is what Smith was after. What he taught was not a self-deluded God-complex theology. It was a sincere expression of African-American religious rhetoric acting as a language that actively espouses freedom to think, be, and act in the interest of the Black group and the Black self.

This exploration into Smith's rhetoric, and the social and intellectual influences that went into making him, unearth a complex person, fascinated with the human condition, as well as a race leader dedicated to uplifting his perceived community. The movement he created, though fraught with its own troubled history, is an example of a Black language community using narrative as a language to build itself. Allah notes that Smith's message was not just philosophical, it was practical, designed to solve the exigencies of the day and act as a language for future generations to use as a means of developing the cultural literacy needed to survive and advance beyond the underclass in United States society (148-49).

Smith's case would probably have been an undocumented blip on history's radar screen if it were not for the furor his incarceration caused in Harlem and its surrounding boroughs. The widespread influence his rhetorical training exercises had on African-Americans in the years following his incarceration is still under-analyzed. But the influence that it had while he was alive is well documented. After his arrest, members of the Five Percenters took up Smith's cause and started evangelizing others with Smith's message (Allah 152-180). Eventually, the Five Percenters morphed from a street gang into a quasi-religious movement with government support from the New York City

Mayor's Office (Cuba 8-31). Though still classified as a gang by the Department of Corrections, the Five Percenters exist as a grassroots social movement that has had a well-documented influence on Black American culture. The Nation of the Gods and Earths (the present-day manifestation of the Five Percenters) boasts an unofficial roster of international membership.³⁷ They are also credited with inspiring the rhetorical invention practices in New York which eventually became rap music. Clearly, insane or not, Smith had a profound rhetorical influence in his community. His story demonstrates, in important ways, that a Black God trope can and did have a powerful influence on creating a language group as a resistance strategy.

The rhetorical power of Smith's new way of thinking and speaking is more easily understood in light of Matthew Johnson's concept of the "African American Christian consciousness." Johnson sees the African-American experience as a shared spiritual and cultural discursive field that has the potential to play counterpoint to white western hegemony. This is what is at the heart of the Five Percent movement: Namely, an understanding that African-American faith practices are often manifested as extra-Christian religious experiences, yet they still have a "healing power" and an "ability to transform the absurd in our existence into something beautiful and meaningful and into the power to go on" using Christian language to do so (*Tragic Vision*, 17). I say "extra-

³⁷ Exact numbers are hard to obtain. The loose knit organizational structure of the group does not readily lend itself to quantifiable statistics. Wakeel Allah and Prince Allah Cuba report that, while Clarence 13X Smith was alive, membership was at about six hundred. Both also estimate contemporary membership numbers in the thousands. This problem is exacerbated by the diffuse nature of the Five Percent Nation. The ideologies contained within the group can differ down to the individual level. Membership seems based on who understands, seeks, and speaks the lessons, rather than quantifiable data markers like church attendance and census identification.

Christian” because at the heart of Smith's and Muhammad's theologies are a fundamental use of tropological language appropriated from African-American Christian discursive practice. While Black Muslim theology is eastern in some of its content, what has been demonstrated is that much of its form is clearly tailored to fit within the Black religious experience in the United States. Five Percent rhetoric is a re-presentation of earlier religious myth. Johnson understands that the faith practices of African-Americans are often inextricably tied to their language praxis and vice-versa. He also recognizes that a shared faith itself is a fundamental characteristic of a rhetorical “African-American-ness,” and that this faith can and should have a positive impact on ameliorating the inherent inequality of white supremacy. Like Smith, Johnson understands that African-American rhetorical practice binds African-Americans together and is both a method of disseminating and expressing counter-culture discourse. In his article, “Lord of the Crucified,” Johnson comments on the intentional ambiguity of the wisdom tradition within Black folk culture, contending:

The wisdom tradition of black North American folk culture dissents from the predominant Western form of disjunctive thinking- that conventional ‘either/or’ in which rationalism insists on unambiguous, univocal meanings for things. Instead this tradition prefers the conjunctive ‘both/and’ of archaic and oral cultures, in which ambiguity and multivocality are taken for granted. (16-17)

What Johnson, and I think Smith, recognize is that human faith is cross-cultural and multi-experiential. Both understand that the collective African-American voice, if acknowledged as a polyphony of divergent discourses, is a voice that often uses religious language to tell the story of the complexity of its everyday experience. Smith called his

understanding of this, “knowledge of self;” Johnson calls it the “field of African-American Christian consciousness.” Both agree that African-Americans share a language inside the Bible’s language that can be used to negotiate life amidst an oppressed position in American society. This language acts in certain respects as a lexicon that African-American writers have drawn upon to speak to and about the African-American experience and the inequities of everyday living in contemporary American society. Smith’s representational reinvention is unique in that it is both linguistic and embodied.

Clarence Smith and the Five Percent Nation are emblematic of what was happening in Black society across America during the Black Power era. From the 1960s forward a militant shift in African-American rhetoric coincides with an in-group conversation among African-Americans about the race of God and Jesus. As the *Ebony* magazine cover in figure 4 shows, by 1969 the image of a Black Christ had seeped into mainstream African-American conversations. Published March 1969, this *Ebony* magazine issue explores the changing worldview of its readers due to the influence of Black Power rhetoric. Two important articles it covers were the burgeoning academic field of Black theology and the psychology of Black Power. The cover story, “The Quest for a Black Christ,” responds to Albert Cleage’s theological critique *Black Messiah*, which depicts Jesus as a Black revolutionary leader. The article explores the then-growing influence of Black Nationalism on the Black church and the African-American worldview. In Cleage’s work, for instance, there is a call for a return of the Black image of Christ in the African-American church and a concern by Christians in general for the material suffering of the Black community with a focus on a social gospel. Cleage’s

rhetoric mirrors James Cone's, who launched his Black liberation theology project in 1967 the same year Smith launched his (A. Johnson, "Prophetic" 266). Both clerics are responding to the cultural impact of the Nation of Islam and its Black God rhetoric. The theological language of Black Liberation theology seemed to *Ebony's* writers to appear in public discourse out of nowhere, but, as Smith and the Five Percenters dramatize, cultural and ideological antecedents to Cleage and Cone existed both in the church and outside of it. The 1960s is marked by Blacks infecting mainstream American culture with sometimes indecipherable slang and militant dissident behavior that energized civil protest and that could not be ignored or explained away.

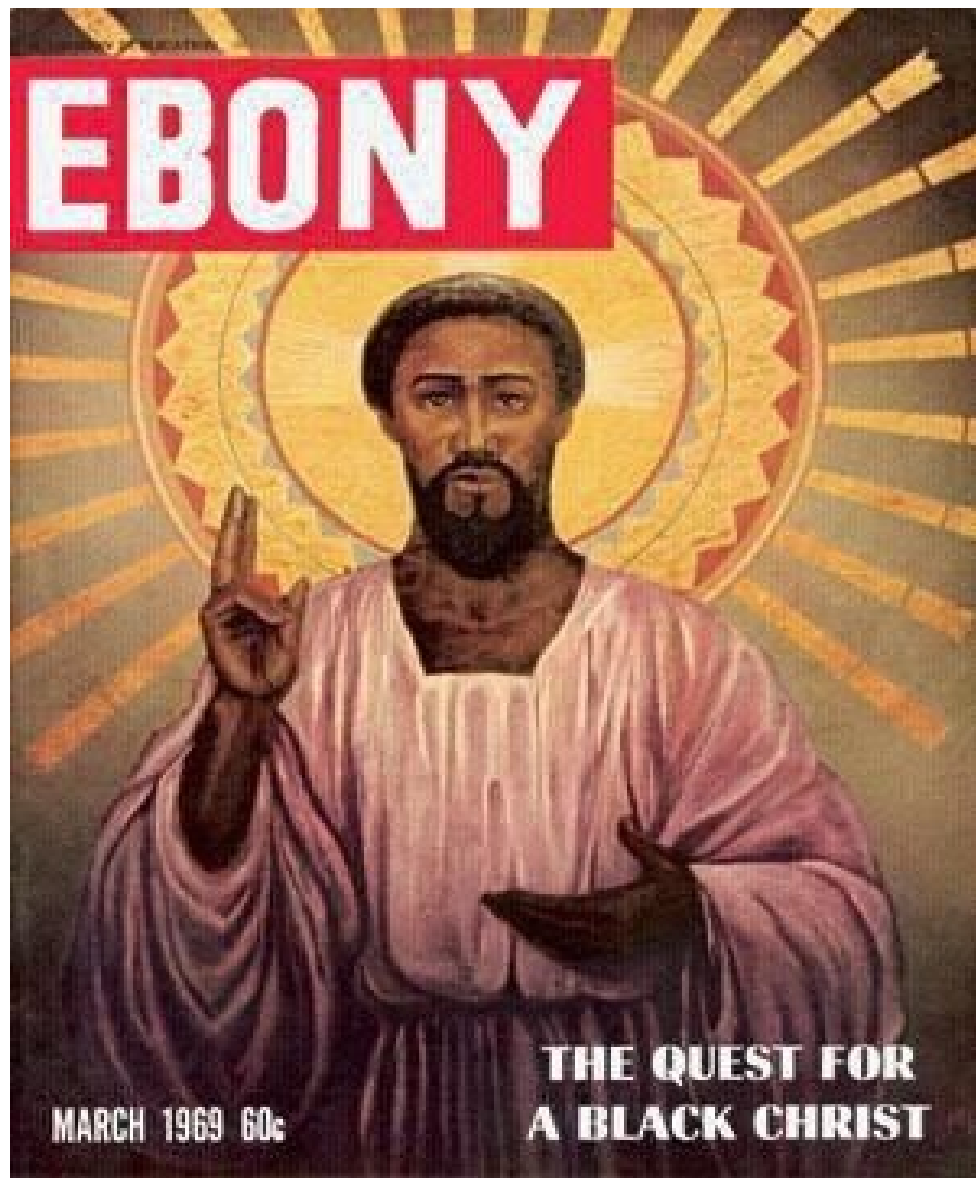


Figure 4. "Black Christ"

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK GOD TROPE IN THE NOVEL: A MESSAGE FROM THE BLACK WOMAN IN AMERICA

The use of the Black God trope by Black women further demonstrates its function as rhetoric in African-American discourse. Like male writers, African-American women rhetors use their writing to create a new rhetoric of what it means to be an African-American person. For some women, the novel acts as a collective voice for the masses, signaling Black peoples' frustration with white supremacy and the casual acceptance of white normativity.³⁸ Womanism is a rhetorical resistance strategy first articulated by Alice Walker in 1983 but was already present as an ideological current in her work and other women writer's work since the 1970s.³⁹ This strategy inverts racist, patriarchal western power relationships, western traditions, religious narratives, and Biblical interpretations. The womanist strategy applies an analytical lens that attempts to empower and liberate African-American women and all people of color in America.

³⁸ R. Wright presages Walker's writing strategy in 1939, saying, "the Negro writer's subject matter and theme, his rebellion will be not only against the exploiting whites, but against all of that within his own race that retards decisive action and obscures clarity of vision". For him, writers like Walker are "valued agents" because of "their ability to fuse and make articulate the experience" of Black people, coalescing the nationalistic aspects of folk culture without espousing a homogenized nationalist identity (409).

³⁹ A. Walker's *Meridian* (1976) is a novel that follows this pattern, highlighting the connection between womanist rhetoric and Black culture post 1960. An earlier example is Hopkins' 1903 *Of One Blood: Or the Hidden Self*.

Womanism expressed as a Black God trope highlights how Black women authors used the novelistic tradition to create rhetorical space for themselves in a male-dominated public sphere in which even Black men silenced them. For example, Walker uses a Black God trope in *The Color Purple* as her method of critiquing and renegotiating white supremacy and male patriarchy as it exists within the framework of African-American relationships. In her essay "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven is that You've Been Driven Out Your Mind," Walker says that she created Celie and Shug as a resistance strategy, the rhetorical mouthpieces for her womanist theological⁴⁰ position (30). She offers personal testimony that explains the Afrocentric social aim of the womanist theology embedded in her writing, connecting it to the theological racism discussed in chapter 2 and the embodied rhetorical response discussed in chapter 3:

Life was so hard for my parents' generation that the subject of heaven was never distant from their thoughts ... There was not one white person in the county that any black person felt comfortable with ...

In the sixties, many of us scared our parents profoundly when we showed up dressed in our "African" or "Native American" or "Celtic" clothes (and in my case, all three). We shocked them by wearing our hair in its ancient naturalness. They saw us turning back to something that they'd been taught to despise and that, by now, they actively feared ... these were black people who were raised never to look a white person directly in the face.

I think now, and it hurts me to think of it, of how tormented the true believers in our church must have been, wondering if, in heaven, Jesus Christ, a white man, the only good one besides Santa Claus and Abraham Lincoln they'd ever heard of, would deign to sit near them. (32)

⁴⁰ Womanist theology is a religious conceptual framework which reconsiders and revises Christian traditions, practices, scriptures, and Biblical interpretations with a special lens to empower and liberate African-American women in America. Womanist theology associates with and departs from Feminist theology and Black theology by integrating the perspectives and experiences of African-American and other women of color in its theology and praxis.

Walker's words reflect "the gradual decline of the moral authority of the Negro church" after WWII and "basic changes in the social and economic conditions" of African-American life post-civil rights (R. Wright 102). Walker is describing how the rhetoric of Black inferiority was programmed into her parents and how her rebellion against that rhetoric was embodied in the behavior of her and her peers. Her personal memory highlights the collective moment in the Black experience that forced her and many others to confront the fear placed in African-Americans by society's rhetoric of racist theology.

Three novels by Black women exemplify Walker's womanist resistance strategy: *The Salt Eaters* (1980) by Toni Cade Bambara, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. Each author uses the novel as a rhetorical genre to combat the intergenerational fear promulgated into African-American culture through white people and Christianity. These novels further demonstrate that theology was not the only rhetorical genre influenced by God-talk in the years following the Black Power movement. In the 1970's, African-American women's novels began to inflect Afrocentric religious themes not popular in the literature before this era. Themes previously regarded as banal or taboo such as voodoo, spiritual healing, and mental health are cloaked in Black God tropes and used to express the subversive voice of their authors. Tracing the use of the Black God as tropological language in these novels reveals how the womanist novel speaks heteroglossically.⁴¹ Using a Black Nationalist voice similar in worldview and intent to the Jeremiad tradition of men, these women

⁴¹ Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way." It is an author's means of rhetorically speaking to their audience, intended and unintended.

rhetoers are able to inhabit the authoritative rhetorical space historically reserved for male religious and/or political leaders within the African-American community. The novel gives these women space to create their own Black Nationalist rhetoric. These authors use the novelistic form to give themselves a platform often unavailable to women via the jeremiad or through public speaking opportunities. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the power of the novel originates in the coexistence of, and conflict between, different types of speech within the text: the speech of characters, the speech of narrators, and even the speech of the author act to serve as the author's voice (291-292). In this case, the speech of the authors is Black Nationalism, and the language they use in their prose is a clue to its presence and meaning, as well as the speech of the author in the text. Black Nationalism being included in a novel is an author's method of arguing through the text. Bakhtin identifies the "literary language" of the author, rather than dialogue between characters, as the primary location of a novel's conflict (273). For this reason, each author is inextricably tied to what she wrote because each author is writing to make a didactic point that is beyond the aesthetic enjoyment readers may obtain from her writing. By employing the Black God trope, these novelists demonstrate how Black Nationalist religious rhetoric informs the aesthetic particularities of a novel, as each illustrates resistance strategies within Black religious culture and outside it.

These women rhetors use the Black God trope to offer a gendered critique of male patriarchy within Christian and Black Nationalist ideologies and movements. Through their womanist novels, these rhetors highlight the negative impacts of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as they become reified in the discourse of the oppressed – even in

its most liberal forms. These novels offer a counter-narrative both literally and figuratively to James Cone's famed 1969 *Black Theology and Black Power* that touted his anti-racist theoretical lens, Black liberation theology. Black liberation theology was Cone's academic response to white supremacy and the encroachment of Black Muslim ideology on African-American culture. He attempts to synthesize the Black Nationalist militancy of Malcolm X with the social gospel of Martin Luther King, Jr. to make Christian theology and the Black church relevant to the African-American experience post-civil rights. Cone rejects the idea that God chose Blacks to suffer for all eternity. On the contrary, for Cone, Black people are agents of human "freedom," who "speak of God and his participation in the liberation of the oppressed" in a land that "is racist and also uses God-language as an instrument to further the cause of human humiliation" (107-108). In 1993 Kelli Brown Douglass publishes *The Black Christ*, a womanist revision of Cone, articulating through theology what the earlier novels of Bambara, Walker, and Morrison had already accomplished. Douglass theoretically offers a corrective to Cone's vision of Black liberation by pointing to his exclusion of Black women's influence over the spiritual and material life of African-Americans as emblematic of the intentional silencing of women's voices in public spaces of the church and Black community throughout history. Moreover, Douglass contends that Cone's male framing of his vision of Black liberation betrays the patriarchal telos of his project. The thought that African-American culture is missing something as evidenced by the degraded position of Black men as community leaders is presumptuous and offensive. Also, the idea that Black women cannot and have not taken effective leadership roles within the Black community

in the absence of Black men is demonstrably false and further perpetuates the violent inequality that is inherent in racism and sexism. Douglass claims:

Christ can be understood as Black. But this "Black Christ" draws attention to only one dimension of Black oppression. Such a Christ challenges Black churches to be prophetic in relation to issues of race, but has little impact beyond that. Black churches then become captive to their history in relation to the race struggle as well as captive to their limited understanding of Christ's presence. (5)

Just as with Bambara, Walker, and Morrison, Douglass is more concerned with the African-American struggle for freedom from all forms of white supremacy and patriarchy than it is concerned with accurately depicting what the historical Jesus may have looked like (4-5). Her Black Christ is concerned with ameliorating the trouble people are suffering in their everyday lived experiences, not whether Black men are receiving the respect they deserve from white people for performing their hetero-normative role in society effectively. Douglass's use of self-love at the expense of traditional Christian values like self-abnegation and love for Christ and the church above all else is at the heart of Black Nationalist and womanist rhetorics in the twentieth century. As Douglass observes of her contemporaries:

The young freedom fighters let it be known that there was no room in the Black community for a Christ who revealed utter contempt for Black life. They loathed the Christ who supported the ravage of Africa, fostered the bondage of Black people, stood silently by during the rapes of Black women, and shamed Black people "by his pigmentation so obviously not their own." (9)

Douglass's testimony corroborates Walker's with the social-cultural connection between the rhetoric of God and the socio-political aspirations of the African-American

community. Her analysis demonstrates the ways in which the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation become reified in the discourse of the oppressed. Connecting the Black God trope to the African-American novel highlights the often-overlooked importance of women's voices to the public articulation of the Black experience. Predating Douglass, Bambara, Walker, and Morrison use their novels to engage in these arguments about Black women's vital roles in alleviating oppression. They challenge the inherent male ethos of Blackness and patriarchal notions of leadership through their novels.

Each novelist uses a Black God trope to inflect a womanist theological perspective. Black women's voices are often subsumed (or assumed) by the Black voice, causing the added problem of a triple marginalization for African-American women.⁴² Triple marginalization is a result of intragroup struggle. Black men often become not only the symbolic voice and identity of Black people, as in Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman*, they also violently suppress Black women's voices that challenge male hegemonic control over the community's voice. Triple marginalization, by recognizing that there is a "complex interplay between gender, class, and sexual oppression and exploitation" and present in white social formations, reifies itself in African-American social formations and renders Black women voiceless inside an already marginalized racial community (Davis 25). In many iterations of Black Nationalism preceding womanism the intentional silencing of women was so systemic that it became necessary to dramatize how women's bodies are implicated in power structures, as well as how

⁴² See Davis.

women's attempts to resist those power structures are marginalized in and through violence. To combat this, several Black women novelists "complicated notions of Black unity and revolution by collectively showing that nation-building could not occur without discussing the relationships between Black men and women and addressing the specific realities of Black women's lives" (Davis 24-25). Womanist constructions of the Black God trope make triple marginalization visible and work to combat it. These novels resist triple marginalization by offering a critique of white hegemony that strengthens and undercuts prior articulations of Christianity and Black Nationalism that preceded them. Replete with rhetorical symbols and ideologies similar to those of the past two chapters, these novels use the Black God trope to offer a poignant gendered critique of patriarchy and male chauvinism within the Black community. As rhetorical artifacts, they are sites of resistance that demonstrate ideological freedom, and the constitutive tools for a type of ideological nation building (Davidson 11). This chapter begins with a brief overview of the importance of the Black God trope to womanist rhetors, then moves into *Salt Eaters* and *Beloved* as texts that invoke Black God tropes to signify their didactic purposes. Following in chapter 5, I explore how the Black God trope identifies the themes of theodicy and Ethiopianism in *The Color Purple* and explain their relevance to Walker's womanist rhetorical agenda.

Though not normally classified as Black Nationalist, the three novels discussed fall within the scope of Adenike Davidson's definition of the Black Nation novel (1). They expand "the discursive range within the field of African American culture, even as that culture is being formed" by them (11). These three texts provide examples of

resistance rhetoric in the following ways: The Black God trope operates rhetorically as a recurring series of images in *Salt Eaters*; it is used as a paradigm for preaching in *Beloved*, and it is a silent antagonist in *Color Purple*. They all convey the aspirations of African-American authors struggling to negotiate their identity in a post-integration America where survival of the individual, fluid gender and sexual identities, and a quest to reclaim a sense of history foreground the need for identification with the collective. A need to be *within* the group is present, but recognizing the *self* within and through the group is ultimately what is important about being a part of the group. The Black Nationalist rhetoric of these three novels foregrounds the ideological tension between self-identity and group identity in the novel's discourse. Black women's ongoing struggle with the most sexist and patriarchal aspects of Black Nationalism, the Black church, and white society, are themes common to all these novels, and their writers use the Black God trope to express those themes. The Black God trope represents Black Nationalist sentiments too complex or brazen for the format of a stump speech or jeremiad. The novels under examination in this chapter provide a gendered critique of how a male monotheistic God helps perpetuate male chauvinism within the Black community. As a speech genre, the novel is a site of resistance that offers ideological freedom and a constitutive tool for a type of ideological nation building (Davidson 11).

The Black God Trope in the Womanist Novel

Black women novelists use the Black God trope to dramatize the "construction of self and identity" and name "the ways structures of domination oppress and make it nearly impossible for Black women to survive and become subjects" (Davis 26). These

novels examined as rhetoric demonstrate that Black women's bodies are implicated in the power structures their authors create in their texts (Davis 26). They dramatize Black women's attempts to resist triple-marginalization in and through religious rhetoric. African-Americans' ethos ranks low among other racial and ethnic groups in the racialized schema of the United States. More often than not, Black people's moral character is associated with a "criminalized and sexualized ethos in visual and print culture" (Pittman 43). Consequently, Black women writers often write against "characteristics associated with good ethos in a slave and post-slavery society" to challenge racial and gender stereotypes and to voice a new vision of social being (Pittman 43). For example, Walker places the bulk of her womanist argument into the mouth and mind of Shug Avery, a jezebel figure, pointing to the contradictions of stereotyping African-Americans women as whorish or socially problematic.⁴³ This point is further dramatized in *The Color Purple* during Sophia's arrest for confronting white authority. Her character confounds servile mammy stereotypes and is literally beat into submission by white supremacy to enforce her race and gender role in society. Walker, Bambara, and Morrison use the novel as a resistance strategy, to dramatize contemporary social concerns.

After the 1970s the womanist novel tradition signals a rhetorical shift in African-American culture from a focus on "We belong to Us" to a focus on "I belong to Me." This shift demonstrates that Black women's voices played an integral role in the history of Black Nationalist religious rhetoric as many used the trope to articulate a need for

⁴³ Butler's *The Chokehold* takes white America's historic criminalization of Black people as its thesis.

individual identity, even within a life lived among a collective. Henry Louis Gates characterizes the growth in popularity of African-American novels written by women during the post-soul era as concomitant with the institutionalization of African-American literature as a field of academic study. He also attributes the rise in this paradigm of resistance to the cultural work of Morrison as both an editor for Random House publishing and as a popular author in her own right. Morrison's influence on the novel is characterized by Black authors who have an ability to speak to and for the Black vernacular using prosaic language. Gates reminds us that this literary tradition is a departure from the Black Arts Movement that directly preceded it:

Black women's writing since 1970 represents a world in which the Black Goddess/Black Queen stereotypes of the Black Arts movement—and the corresponding Black Warrior/Black Prince stereotypes for men—are rejected as cardboard stereotypes just as pernicious as the Sambo-Mammy types of the white racist plantation tradition. In this sense, the writing of Black women is "political," indeed, but it takes its craft too seriously to be dismissed as merely propaganda. (Gates and McKay 4)

Gates's use of the term "propaganda" as a pejorative accentuates the benefit of using a rhetorical approach to the womanist novel. A significant part of the propaganda he is referring to is the Black Nationalist religious rhetoric discussed in chapters 2 and 3. He dismisses the Black Nationalist elements of womanist novels as incidental, or even distracting, because he relegates Black Nationalism to the status of a lower-order concern for African-American novelists and intellectuals. He separates the craft of Black women's writing from the "propaganda" and the thematic elements in them to allow himself space to analyze the aesthetic aspects of these works without dealing with the

messy details of their constitutive elements, much less the meaning of those elements in relationship to the presumed reader. A rhetorical approach to these novels is more useful because it does not consider the Black Nationalist elements of the novel trivial or a hindrance; on the contrary, these elements are central to understanding who and how the author is attempting to use the novel to persuade.

The Black Goddess stereotypes still exist in African-American literature long after the Black Arts Movement; they however show up differently, often as a critique of Black Nationalism's critiques. Black Nationalist discourse was everywhere after the Black Power movement. Literacy was also at an all-time high, even if graduation rates were not.⁴⁴ Black people were publishing and selling books about Black people to Black people at a staggering rate because broad access to African-American authors had not existed in abundance before this era. White publishers and editors had previously controlled Black writers' access to buying audiences, and they only allowed a small percentage of prominent Black authors to exist in the limelight at one time. This predicament narrowed the range of Black discourse used to represent the diversity within African-American thought and culture until the infusion of womanist novels appearing during Morrison's reign as editor at Random House. To be sure there were always independently published Black authors in the African-American community, but few had the literary success of a Samuel Greenlee's 1967 *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*.

⁴⁴ The National Center for Education's 1995 *The Educational Progress of Black Students* charts an increase in African-American reading literacy between 1970 and 1990. The study also notes a significant achievement gap between African-Americans and whites, but does not pinpoint structural inequality as its catalyst.

The womanist tradition offered writers the freedom of expression and an interracial audience. Bambara, Morrison, and Walker dramatize what theologian Nelle Morton expresses:

When I speak of the Goddess as metaphoric image I am in no way referring to an entity “out there” who appears miraculously as a fairy godmother and turns the pumpkin into a carriage. I am not even referring to a Goddess “back there” as if I participate in resurrecting an ancient religion. In the sense that I am woman I see the Goddess in myself, but I need something tangible; a concrete image or a concrete event, to capture my full attention to the present and draw me into the metaphoric process ...

The context in which I experienced the Goddess grew out of a kind of unconscious awareness that, even though conceptually I no longer accepted a God “out there” nor defined “God within” as male, on the level of imagery the maleness was still alive and functioning in me on most unexpected occasions. (Plaskow and Christ 111)

Morton uses her Goddess as a segue into non-racist, non-sexist thinking about God and humanity. She understands the necessity of a God image to conceptualize the higher reality that the term is supposed to represent yet recognizes that a male gendered image is limiting to women who want to see themselves in God and God in themselves. She uses her constructed Goddess as a conduit to deeper human truths and a refracted version of her own humanity. The authors and novels examined here follow a similar path. Their constructed Gods offer a segue into a higher order conversation about Black religion and communal living.

Toni Cade Bambara’s Black God Trope in *The Salt Eaters*

Bambara composed *The Salt Eaters* in Atlanta in 1978 as a testament to her womanist social-political stance. During the construction of the novel, Atlanta’s racism

and discrimination pervaded both public and private spaces. Black people and whites lived in different, although not totally separate, discursive communities. Bambara recognized this and used the difference in these distinct speech communities to craft her political novel. At the time, she was an English professor who worked tirelessly to increase awareness of politically conscious Black writers (Holmes 110). For her, the novel was an artistic pathway to public voice. *The Salt Eaters* not only let her tell about the world, it allowed her to create it. The power to reorder reality gave her the power to reorder the disorder of reality as she saw it. Bambara makes use of cryptic language and esoteric religious motifs to make a womanist argument that expresses disbelief and discontent with the misogyny and opportunism of progressive Black politics and the church (112). *The Salt Eaters* is a “writerly text,” meaning that it is made up of a “galaxy of signifiers” and requires an active reader to co-produce its plurality of meanings (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 639).

Bambara’s Black God trope is one of the main signifiers in *The Salt Eaters* and is represented in the text as a collective of women of color working together to heal the world, and by extension, resist assimilation into Eurocentric white American culture and the paternal nature of its institutions of power. She does this in two ways: through her protagonists and through symbolism. Bambara contends with these issues within the relationship between her protagonists, Velma Henry, who is physically and psychologically broken after working with Black men and white women for Black liberation, and Minnie Ransom, who uses esoteric healing practices to achieve a form of racial uplift that challenges modern notions of Black men as race leaders. The two

characters are the centrifugal force that coalesces all the stories that are told through them and around them. Velma possesses the personal tools to bring herself back from the verge of defeat but must go to Minnie, a Black woman, to heal her spiritual and psychological pain first. Minnie's work takes place alongside traditional western medicine (Hull 128). Bambara explains that she recognized "a split between the spiritual, psychic, and political forces" in the Black community (qtd in Hull 128). *The Salt Eaters* "grew out of my attempt to fuse the seemingly separate frames of reference of the camps; it grew out of an interest in identifying bridges; it grew out of a compulsion to understand how the energies of this period will manifest themselves in the next decade" (qtd in Hull 128). Her Black God trope is evidenced in the character interactions of women in the story like Nadeen, who is watching Velma's healing. Nadeen's memory interjected into the text is an example of Bambara voicing her womanist theological position heteroglossically. Bambara's voice is speaking through Nadeen's voice in the text. Nadeen understands Velma's healing looks much differently than the tent revival healing she once saw. Her eyes are "riveted on Mrs. Henry's wrists" to draw readers attention to an important shift taking place at this moment in the text. Velma's healed wounds contrast the symbolic power of Jesus's still open wounds. Nadeen is witnessing the interconnectedness of the physical, spiritual, and psychological and must weigh what she is seeing against the teachings of her Christian upbringing to process what she has observed. (Bambara 111-113). Nadeen says of Velma's healing:

Revival Healing was just not it ... This is what it was supposed to be. A clean, freshly painted, quiet music room with lots of sunlight. People standing and wishing Mrs. Henry well and knowing Miss Ransom would do what she would

do. Miss Ransom known to calm fretful babies with a smile or a pinch of the inner thigh, known to cool out nervous wives who bled all the time and couldn't stand still, known to dissolve hard lumps in the body that the doctors at county hospitals called cancers. This was the real thing ... this was the real place and, Miss ransom was the real thing. (113)

This scene dramatizes the novel's thematic critique, but it never connects to any other plot element in the text. Other than Velma's healing being the presumed location of Nadeen during the scene, nothing about the episode is needed to understand the protagonist or the plot. It is one of many vignettes Bambara includes within the story to create her womanist argument. The scene works to question mainstream Black Christianity, and further emphasizes Bambara's critique of western rationalism, through the primacy of mysticism over other modes of thinking and knowing. Bambara uses the female characters in her novel to create her own field of healing rhetoric outside patriarchal discourse. Her non-linear storytelling challenges the reader to engage in an in-group conversation with her and her characters by deducing the heteroglossia in her use of symbolic action (Hull 130). The persuasive power of *The Salt Eaters* speaks through the imagery used to tell the story. The name "Velma Henry" is, for example, a rhetorical balancing of feminine and masculine energies. Bambara invites this reading of Velma by creating an imbalance in Velma that stems from her not accepting her whole self, recognizing that Velma "has never been the center of her own life before" (Bambara 240).

Bambara's construction of mud as a symbol also has the power to work heteroglossically and directs readers' attention to the novel's discourse on gender relationships, Afrocentrism, and Black history if they are familiar with the terms of the

cultural connection.⁴⁵ Mud is a motif that runs throughout the novel and connects the text to the Black God trope in that it is used to signify the spiritual healing necessary to mend the central problem of the text – Velma’s mental health and the need for communal healing.⁴⁶ The mud mothers are introduced as residing “in that other place” where they are “painting the walls of the cave and calling to” Velma, but she hesitates to respond (8). The mud mothers are the collective voices of her ancestors. Velma is introduced to the mud mothers when she checks herself into an infirmary, after she has lost touch with the traditions of her people, an essential component of her ancestral system and mental health. For Bambara, the ancestral system is a rich and complex network of individuals, groups, customs and beliefs that are instructive, protective, and benevolent, that she symbolizes using mud and the cast of characters that inhabit the novel. They are Blackness. Ancestors are timeless and provide wisdom. When this ancestral system is weak or absent, the trajectory of suffering becomes unbearable. Bambara is setting up a rhetorical cosmology that is sympathetic to many traditional African religious systems (Hull 130). Although Velma is constantly admonished to get out of the mud, Minnie admits that there is “nothing wrong” with staying there until she is ready, because the mud is a necessary stage of the growth process (Bambara 16). Perhaps this is because mud is made from two of the most life affirming properties on the planet, earth and water. It is, for the purposes of this discussion, a Black God trope. Earth is a euphemism that

⁴⁵ Hull offers an insightful analysis of *The Salt Eaters* but does not offer an analysis of the Black Nationalist rhetoric in the text or deduce the meaning of Mud Mothers.

⁴⁶ Liddel uses an “Afrocentric” theoretical paradigm to analyze *The Salt Eaters*. Her approach draws a parallel between Velma’s individual healing and the communal healing of African-Americans represented by the fictional town of Claybourne, GA in the text.

refers to Black women, whom the Black Muslims call the mothers of all of humanity, pointing to humanity's African roots and the centrality of an earth-women connection within that discourse. Similarly, water is symbolic of knowledge, wisdom, and/or god-like powers, in many African traditions. Varieties of African creation myths use water to symbolize universal motherhood. In ritual ceremonies, water has regenerative and transformative qualities. Purification by water has a restorative power, as in Judeo-Christian baptism (Ogunbile 23). The mixture of the two, water and earth, is mud or a wise woman with transformative energy – the Black woman as a Black God. The word “mother” in the use of the term “mud mothers” strengthens this connection, because motherhood is seen as the foundation and ultimate completion of humanity in several Black Nationalist rhetorics.

Bambara uses the symbolism of mud to signify Afrocentrism, naturalist religion, community, and healing in the novel as a way of subverting the institutional authority of white patriarchal discourses. Bambara uses mud as a symbolic critique of the patriarchal qualities of Black Nationalism and other male led discourses, challenging the politics of respectability that is a staple in African-American social justice movements prior to 1980. In challenging this, Bambara demonstrates that Blacks must get dirty to get clean. Velma is chided by Minnie for being stuck in a “mud puddle” and urges her to “come into the warm and be done with the mud” (16). But Velma is depleted physically, emotionally, and spirituality from having sacrificed her personhood to perform the frontlines and auxiliary work needed to make the great social movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s progress. Bambara is using Velma to remind readers that these movements succeeded to the

varying degrees they did due in large part to the work and subordination of Black women. Black male leaders had to project a squeaky-clean, masculine image in order to publicly discourse with whites. Bambara subverts this relational dynamic by using mud to signify an inversion of the politics of respectability that runs through the aesthetics and rhetoric of most African-American male-led social movements prior to the '80s.⁴⁷ Mud is a positive healing symbol rather than a pejorative. It signifies a critique of the racism and patriarchy inherent in the practices of many Black male leaders and the social protest movements they represent. Bambara uses mud as a narrative inversion technique. Narrative inversion occurs when a rhetor reverses or inverts traditionally accepted and revered master narratives, with the strategic aim of amplifying the perceived injustices and inequalities embedded within those master narratives (Acevedo, Ordner, and Thompson 126). Bambara offers a symbolic point of opposition to the master narrative that African-Americans achieve racial uplift and structural reform in the United States by living a life sanctioned by the white patriarchy, a life of respectability. She replaces this in *The Salt Eaters* with a spiritual healing of individual African-American persons through a reconnection with themselves, the earth, ancestral spirits, and other human beings. These elements become connected through a hard and honest engagement with slavery's influence over the modern moment, conceptualized as mud. In Bambara's rhetoric, Black people must get dirty to get clean.

⁴⁷ Respectability politics offers a critique of African-American cultural and moral practices looked down upon by white society. In Black Nationalist history, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Farrakhan all espouse various forms of it in their religious rhetoric. See Wolcott. 5–7.

Bambara uses Minnie Random as a tropological figure to invert the aesthetic and ideological power relationships of the politics of respectability and to highlight the need to get dirty to get clean. In a telling scene, Minnie asks her spirit guide, Old Wife:

What is happening to the daughters of yam [black women]? Seems like they don't know how to draw up the powers from the deep like before ...

I'm telling you, when we let these silly children arrange their own marriages without teaching them about compatible energies, bout the powers, we made a serious mistake. (Bambara 44)

The discourse Minnie is echoing says that Black women possess an innate psycho-physical strength that is somehow being diminished the further they get away from the core value system of their ancestors. Although scholars such as Melissa Harris-Perry challenge the myth of the Black superwoman,⁴⁸ this belief in reference to African-American women is prominent in Black Nationalist rhetoric during the last quarter of the twentieth century. As the myth goes, African women who are the mothers of civilization were made stronger by the trials of slavery and American oppression. They only need tap into their inner fortitude to save humanity from itself. The missive is directed at the perceived downside to integration, cultural assimilation. The Black God trope aids in understanding these and some of the otherwise indecipherable elements of a novel like *The Salt Eaters*.

The previous examples demonstrate that the Black God trope also functions as a rhetoric, or way of speaking a message, in African-American literature. More clear and direct examples come from the rhetorics of Morrison in *Beloved* and Walker in *The Color*

⁴⁸ See Harris-Perry's 2011 *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*.

Purple. Both novels use the Black God trope to espouse a womanist theology to speak to, of, and for African-Americans. In each of these novels the Black God trope gets used differently. In *Beloved*, the Black God is an enthymematic discourse disguised as an old slave woman usurping the paradigm of preacher. The retributive hand of God is characterized as the cause for Beloved's return to haunt her family that is tempered by the presence and spirit of Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs's sermon serves as a counter-balance to this retributive God, a reminder to the novel's audience that God is on the side of the oppressed. In *The Color Purple*, the Black God trope is seen both in Celie's monologue with God and in her retelling of Shug Avery's personal philosophy about God. Both are types of enthymematic discourse that mirror the humanist telos of Elijah Muhammad's religious rhetoric and invert the politics of respectability.

The Black God trope helps these authors tap into the collective memory of African-Americans to conjure images that critique the modern experience without relying on the depiction of modern realities to do so. These novels convey the aspirations of authors struggling to negotiate Black identity in a post-integration America where the survival of the individual, fluid gender roles and sexual identities, and a quest to reclaim a sense of history foreground the literature. That the novels reach back into the past to rhetorically create a Black home space that is devoid of prolonged white encroachments is telling in reference to the difficulty of creating such a space in the modern era and to the method and purpose of the novel in speaking to African-Americans. This signifies a resistance to white and integrated rhetorical spaces. The Black God tropes used in these two novels are examples that allow us to easily see a gendered Black Nationalist critique

of the Black community, the Christian church, and white supremacy. They also point to the struggle of the gendered self amid a male-privileging group dynamic. I end this chapter with an examination of Baby Sugg's sermon in *Beloved* as a Black God trope. In chapter 5, I develop a related argument for *The Color Purple*.

Baby Suggs's Sermon in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Morrison's Black God trope is implied in the absence of a structural church and formal deity in the folk church Baby Suggs's character and sermon represent. Baby Suggs's character operates as a Black God trope, acting as the earthly vessel for divine authority. Her ethos as a worship leader usurps patriarchal authority. I cite the passage below at length for two reasons. First, this passage contains a major theme of the novel, namely, an indictment of United States slavery and its continued effects on African-Americans, which left many with a self-destructive hatred of each other that hinders the possibility of group or individual identity or harmony. Second, several rhetorical elements converge within this passage to show not only Morrison's strong affinity for the Black folk tradition but also her radical departure from the institutionalized Christian church's patriarchal structure and message. A female lay preacher who was herself a slave is a stand-in for the traditional male preacher of the institutionalized church. Baby Suggs's role is to be the earthly surrogate of God's word. That the divine word emanates from her mouth runs counter to the Christian church's prohibition against women preachers. It also foregrounds the uniqueness of a Black female's voice in charge of divine and communal authority. This passage offers an example of the dichotomy between the slave's religion and institutionalized Christianity. A focus on the Black God

trope in this section of *Beloved* allows for a conjoining of the novel as critique and the novel as folklore. Focusing on this passage gives a better understanding of Morrison as a folk writer of the “culture worker” ilk Bambara espouses, because it illustrates how Black Nationalist religious rhetoric performs a propagandist function in the text. Early in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs sermonizes to her all Black audience:

Here...in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. They only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that need to be loved. Feet that need to rest and dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck un-noosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver -love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.
(Morrison 88-89)

Baby Suggs as the Black God trope tells readers how to think about the subject of the novel's critique: the relationship of African-Americans to racist American institutions. This critique is most obvious in Baby Suggs's preaching style. As a means of persuasion, her vernacular speech is loose, free, and authoritative. She is inhabiting the prophetic jeremiad voice described in chapter 2. Her speech is also natural, a theme underscored by

its setting (i.e. the clearing in the woods, away from the center of town and away from white people). The scene is an example of what a real Black folk church might have looked like back then, but it also functions rhetorically in the text to provide a counterpoint to the formal structure of institutionalized Black spaces, patterned largely after white American institutions. Baby Suggs's position during the sermon suggests that in the naturalist space of the forest church, Blacks can maintain their own community, and their human dignity. Her role as leader also indicates that the organization of these institutions looks different when organized by the community.

Baby Suggs's words provide the best example of the Black Nationalist discourse within the text. More of a "caller" than a preacher, Baby Suggs gives her congregants the moral and emotional uplift they need to withstand the ravages of their shared condition. But she is doing more than just making Black people "feel good." What she is doing is equipping them, and by extension the reader, with the tools necessary to understand and overcome the white/Black power dynamic in American society. Noticeably, she does so without ever leaning on the Christian imagery normally associated with Black preaching, a nod to Morrison's aversion for "spook-in-the-sky" religious formulations. Rather, Morrison simply embeds a Christian message of love into the form of a charismatic preacher and sermon. "Here we flesh," for example, is a reminder of the dehumanizing process that slavery was and that segregation and discrimination seek to perpetuate. One of the goals of white supremacy as practiced through slavery and racism was to make Africans-Americans believe their bodies to be non-humans or non-flesh, a fact alluded to by the treatment of Baby Suggs and her fellow slaves at Sweet Home in the novel. This

goal is part of the enduring psychological trauma of slavery still felt by African-Americans in 1987. Baby Suggs's message is similar to that of the Black Muslims in that its theological focus is African-American people in the contemporary and historical moment. Her sermon is devoid of references to external saviors, highlighting the religious personalism⁴⁹ that was in vogue with Black authors in the post-civil-rights era. For instance, "Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it," refers to the violent experience of alienation African-Americans have endured through years of being "yonder" while near whites. "They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick them out," is an allusion to, a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. "If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matthew 5:29). Morrison inverts Jesus' condemnation of adulteress women, instead shaming the people who do the eye plucking rather than those whose eyes are plucked out. "No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it," continues this theme by describing America's historic abuse of Black bodies, especially Black women, from slavery onward.

Morrison is using Baby Suggs to critique a society that has callously watched Black skin flayed yonder over and over again through state sanctioned violence with little resolve to change its moral behavior. "And O my people they do not love your hands. They only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty" is used in much the same way "The

⁴⁹ "In its various strains, personalism always underscores the centrality of the person as the primary locus of investigation for philosophical, theological, and humanistic studies. It is an approach or system of thought which regards or tends to regard the person as the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological, and axiological principle of all reality, although these areas of thought are not stressed equally by all personalists." Williams, Thomas D. and Bengtsson, Jan Olof, "Personalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/personalism/>>.

120 Lessons” uses the traders story: it describes slavery and the one-hundred and fifty-year tradition of mass incarceration of African-Americans as a means of profiteering and population control. Baby Suggs subverts the perspective of “they” by imploring the Black individual to see the Black self in the now and not the yonder. Her words empower the positive self-belief of the listeners who know too much about yonder. Yonder is a place and a feeling/experience of profound isolation and oppression caused by living under the rule of “they,” whom remain nameless in the passage. In this way, Baby Suggs is written as an ancestor to Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Clarence Smith. Long before Black Lives Matter, police brutality was at the heart of African-Americans social protest concerns. Morrison is echoing a sentiment here that is included in the 10-point platform of the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party for self-defense. “Love your hands!” is a reminder that African-Americans have to love themselves in a world that will not do it for them, because self-love is important. The “self” in this sense includes both Blacks as a group and as individuals. Blacks without self-love, who cannot obtain it or who cannot hold on to it, die like Beloved. By focusing on the individual as a human that stands beyond the group, Baby Suggs's sermon is aimed at inspiring group pride in the individual. While seemingly at odds with Black Nationalism and the Christian ideal of love for others, over (and often against) love of oneself – this rhetorical stance offers a healing psychology. As such, womanism offers a critique of Black Nationalism and patriarchy that engages racism with a new version of the Christian message of love. The “My/We” and “Yonder they” sentence structure of the sermon clearly signifies the “us” and “them” polarity between Blacks and whites in the United States. But rather than

bridge the gap with a Christian hermeneutic that says embrace your enemy, despite all they may do to you, Baby Suggs's message of Christian love says love yourself, because your enemy does not. This is a radical departure from the passive resistance stance promoted by many of the traditional messages given to Blacks from Christianity during and after slavery, especially during the Civil Rights movement. Morrison is subverting hundreds of years of Christian teaching and preaching, by both white and Black Christians, which came with the express and/or implied message: "you Blacks are a part of an oppressed group and should humbly stay down in your place." According to slaves' own accounts, there has always been a demonstrable parallel between Christianity and racism's pathological violence in its sponsorship of African-American docility (Ferguson 297). Baby Suggs's message does not even come close to sponsoring a docile position. Morrison recognizes that revolution and accommodation are not the only means of survival and resistance. For her, language, community, and culture offer a type of needed "freedom," if not exactly in the past, definitely in the modern present.

Helping to further explain Morrison's departure in approach to articulating the Black experience may be the fact that Baby Suggs can be described as a type of conjure woman within her adopted Ohio neighborhood. Her character speaks as a rhetorical symbol in ways beyond just her use of language or Morrison's use of setting to convey a discourse. As a tropological figure Baby Suggs offers a necessary third space, a discourse that does not capitulate to the tragic structure of the narrated environment or veer off into

a murderous revenge fantasy.⁵⁰ Rather, Baby Suggs speaks to and against white supremacy both in the novel and in the world of the reader, refusing to lash out or fold. Her character is constructed not only as a lay preacher but also as an elder, healer, and object of public exaltation and derision, similar to Bambara's mud mothers. Historically, folk preachers like Baby Suggs were a real part of nineteenth-century Black life before, and after, the Civil War. Morrison creates Baby Suggs's character as a salve that bridges the chasm between the insanity of slavery and the struggle for freedom that was the reality of reconstruction Blacks. How does one reconstruct what was torn to begin with? Morrison uses Baby Suggs's character to signal that Blacks are still under reconstruction, even after the Civil Rights movement. Morrison's Baby Suggs operates as a character familiar with the established churches, but one who opts to augment Sunday services with her own impromptu revivals. Her neighbors listen to her sermons because of her authoritative role for them within the community, even while they persist in their allegiance to institutionalized racism symbolized by the Christian church because of its normative stature in white society.

The Black folk church is often described in terms similar to the American folk church. However, as William Wiggins reminds us, "Slavery and persistent racial injustice have caused the Black folk church to interpret" the tenets and rituals of American folk religion "very differently" (146). The traumatic experience of slavery caused Christ and the Christian narrative to become central elements in individual and group identity formation. But exact adherence to Biblical lore and/or strict adherence to church tradition

⁵⁰ The plot of two famous male-authored Black Nationalist novels *Blake* and *Spook Who Sat by the Door* devolve into murder-revenge fantasies, underscoring this trend in the genre.

have never been what has motivated African-Americans to use Biblical lore as language. This fact is often evidenced by the Bible's rootedness in the structure of African-American discursive logic (M. Johnson 7). The symbol world offered by Christian narrative did, and still does, provide "African Americans with a structure for the constitution of subjectivity and the beginnings of a new selfhood" (8). Read this way, Baby Suggs's sermon is an example of African-Americans' very different interpretation of Christianity and its message of love.

While references are made to torture and death, the sermon does not speak out directly against slavery or Christianity, nor does Morrison explicitly say through Baby Suggs, "these were the many abuses committed against African-Americans." Instead, they are alluded to through the use of pronouns: "[T]hey do not love your neck un-noosed and straight. So love your neck" (Morrison 89). Neither does the passage begin to name the names of the transgressors it is aimed against or the supplicants it is designed to inspire; they are always inferred. These allusions and inferences within Baby Suggs's words illustrate an enthymematic discourse just as fiery as Marcus Garvey's oratory. Claude Brown suggests that authenticity may have been the reason why Morrison chose to cloak Baby Suggs's highly charged words rather than say it all plainly. He contends: "Before the Civil War there were numerous restrictions placed on the speech of slaves... Consequently, Negro slaves were compelled to create a semi-clandestine vernacular in the way that the criminal underworld has historically created words to confound law enforcement agents" (233). Baby Suggs's soft words are really daggers. Her sermon is a call to African-Americans to take control of their own person – a responsibility slavery

and the concomitant racialized segregation and discrimination that are its legacy seek to constantly deprive them of. In 1987, this message was still a clarion call for African-Americans, a generation into integration.

Baby Suggs's invocation in the sermon is that Blacks learn to "love your flesh" because "yonder they do not." Within this phrasing is a Black woman saying to the Black reader take back your life from white people and decide what to do with your "self" outside the confines of their unnatural normal. In her sermon, Baby Suggs gives vent to the revelations she had herself once she first became free (141). She tells her neighbors that from here on out, your life is your own, make something of it, or *they* will. Morrison provides a similar message to her contemporary African-American readers who feel trapped psychologically between a quest for independence from white society and a symbiotic dependence on a connection with them. The oppression of slavery took the precious right of decision-making away from the slave. Morrison's hope is that modern African Americans regain the power of controlling that natural right now that they are ostensibly free to do so. This theme undergirds the novel. Although nineteenth-century Ohio was still restrictive, it was not as harsh as Kentucky bondage. Knowing this and knowing that slaves needed to be reprogrammed after the psychological trauma of their shared ordeal, Morrison writes Baby Suggs's sermon as a message of self-aggrandizement with a communal purpose. As such, she draws a parallel between the degree in racism's severity in Kentucky and Ohio to its severity in slavery and post-integration to make the point that racist oppression may differ in intensity, but it does not differ in the kind of danger it represents for Black people.

The language used in Morrison's scene and Baby Suggs's character offers an indictment of African-American slavery and challenges the established white aesthetic of modern American literature by using the Christian practice of preaching to suggest a womanist theological position. Through the novel's championing of a female Black God trope, Morrison's use of a Black female slave preacher as a construct to do so is an implicit gendered critique of not only white Christian patriarchy but also Black Christian patriarchy. When *Beloved* was first published, America had moved a century away from slavery, but African Americans and whites were still fixed in the bifurcated racial roles established by slavery's imposed hierarchy. The racist social order that the slave master's religion had codified was fully actualized. Morrison's words and character are speaking to that African-American issue. *Beloved* suggests that for Blacks, the trauma of slavery is engendered in the slaves' fundamental inability to choose their own destiny post-slavery, a burden that is part and parcel of the historical African-American experience. Over and over this theme replays itself throughout the novel, and it is a primary reason Baby Suggs and Sethe are constantly betrayed by their neighbors, who view them as too proud. Their insular attitude and choices cause them public ridicule as non-conformists. This non-conformist attitude is prophetic in its power to tell a deeper story. Baby Suggs's sermon contains a rhetoric that attempts to deliver a communal message to modern African-American readers of self-love. The urgency of this message was lost to most Blacks listening to Baby Suggs in the novel (as the results of the story prove), but the ideas encoded in the Black God trope are salient in the real world of Morrison's readers. African-American history is full of rebellious Baby Suggs's preaching the truth about

self-love and escaping oppression. Baby Suggs's message of racialized self-pride is certainly akin to the message of Elijah Muhammad. Her enthymematic method of delivering her message is reminiscent of Clarence 13X Smith's use of the word "God" as a trope. But unlike them, her Black God includes women as absolutely necessary and never secondary.

Like Yacub and Fard, the power of Baby Suggs as a rhetorical figure should not be discounted. Morrison writes Baby Suggs as an anti-hero of the Western aesthetic, who operates as an inverted mammy figure. Morrison does this with Baby Suggs by using the Big Momma trope to disguise a Black God trope message. Baby Suggs is a woman who spent the first sixty years of her life as a Carolina and Kentucky slave, so she knows the horrors of unchecked white supremacy. Suggs's back story points to the totalizing pervasiveness of slavery's pathology. By the time she is a free woman in Ohio and sermonizing, freedom means little to her because she has lost so much to gain it. Though free, her time on earth by the time she is granted freedom has known nothing but the pain, misery, and abuse of racial subjugation in the United States. She is, in many respects, a non-existent person in American rhetoric with an even more non-existent voice, even in the institutionalized Black Christian church save for specific auxiliary roles. But Baby Suggs's non-voice is exactly what gives her rhetorical agency and her sermon power, both inside and outside of the text. Baby Suggs appears powerless, but connecting her Black female body to her words and the deeper meaning they signify suggests a rhetoric of resistance on Morrison's part on two levels. Baby Suggs' Black female body acts as an embodied rhetoric, and her words are a linguistic rhetoric. Both

work together to critique male monotheistic religious institutions and paradigms. By giving a poor Black woman a voice at the head of the community, Morrison inverts Western social norms within her novel and resists triple marginalization outside of it. Like Bambara, she creates a Black dystopia in her novel to achieve her rhetorical aims. In both women's novels, collectivism gives way to a search for personal identity while the language of these texts also demonstrates that a sense of a common ancestral heritage and modern communal purpose is not lost in womanism. A pertinent question these novels pose is – how does a person's group identity find harmony with their individual identity amidst the legacy of slavery, rape, physical abuse, and marginalization that is the African-American female's collective experience at the hands of both white and Black men in the United States? This isolation forces a search for individual identity.

That these novels focus on female protagonists is vital to their ability to echo a Black Nationalist religious rhetoric that is more self-centered than other popular forms of this rhetoric. A need to be *within* the group is present, but each author recognizes that the sanctity of the self is ultimately what is important about being a part of the group considering the sexual abuse women endure. As “cultural workers,” Bambara and Morrison use their novels to resist white supremacy and patriarchy. By positioning Baby Suggs, a Black woman, in physical and ideological contradistinction to institutional authority, Morrison argues against the glorification of white men, one of the theological underpinnings of America's racialized culture. Like Walker and Bambara, Morrison suggests Christian monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule through its religious system. In African-American culture, both religious and secular, this pattern

of male-dominant social order creates multiple oppressions that must be addressed for a full transformation of racism in American society to take place. The Black God trope in *Beloved* and similar womanist novels challenge this relational dynamic. Each woman author referenced here constructs a Black God trope that confounds the white patriarchy inherent in Christian discourses, focusing on God's relationship to oppressed African-Americans. Each author also uses her trope to balance the power relationships between men and women, as a function of creating Black rhetorical space. Black women using their characters to embody their religious rhetoric provide the space to reshape Black Nationalism while simultaneously offering it a critique. One final example comes from *The Color Purple*, discussed in the next chapter, where Walker more fully explores the Black God trope.

CHAPTER V

ALICE WALKER'S WOMANIST BLACK GOD TROPE AND *THE COLOR PURPLE*⁵¹

In the three novels examined, patriarchal authority is represented by the Christian church as an institution and progenitor of theology. The novels create a counter-theology within their discourses. Toni Cade Bambara creates a Black God trope through her female characters who relocate the healing power of the male preacher and the church to the infirmary run by Minnie Ransom and ancestor worship. Toni Morrison dislocates the institutional authority of the church by investing the Black God trope into a single character, Baby Suggs, who underscores her authority by preaching in nature, outside of a physical church as an added contrast. Alice Walker's Black God trope in *The Color Purple* moves institutional authority away from an impersonal, disembodied, white male Christian God to a more personal and naturalistic God concept realized through the dialogue and relational dynamics of her Black female characters. The Black God trope manifests through Celie's awakening within a community of women, but this awakening is actually a strategic use of language by Walker that challenges readers to confront Western notions of God and male patriarchy. Unlike Bambara and Morrison, Walker's use of the trope is more expansive and unfolds throughout the exposition of

⁵¹ In her essay, "Centering on Women but Ignoring Race and Economics," hooks offers a Marxist feminist reading of the *The Color Purple* that serves as a resource for this intersectional reading of the text. Unlike this reading, hooks discounts the rhetorical function of symbolism in the text. Her approach places an unnecessary demand on the author to meet the expectation of a linear literalist protest critique.

her novel. Whereas Bambara and Morrison create discreet moments within their texts where the Black God trope is apparent, Walker's trope only becomes visible when threaded together as it exists throughout the novel.

Walker writes not as a Black Muslim or a Christian but as a woman of color, espousing a naturalistic humanism influenced by the theologies of Christianity and the Nation of Islam, but free from the dogmatic entanglements habituated within both institutions. She rationalizes her choice to infuse her novel with womanist religious rhetoric this way:

Ever since I was a child, I had been aware of the high rate of domestic violence in our town, among our people; wives shot or stabbed to death, children sometimes abused and beaten. Miserable men who seemed unable not to ruin their lives; who seemed born with the prison door stretched wide before them. Men who had been taught from the Bible that women are the cause of all evil in the world, and were not, simply as female human beings, to be trusted and certainly not to honored, respected, loved, or held in reverence as the center of human life. The Bible had been the only reading matter black people were permitted during our long enslavement; for 300 years they were not even allowed to read it for themselves. This was indoctrination at its most relentless; naïve to think it would not leave a deadly, self-despising mark. One might be expected to love one's neighbor as one's self—such a beautiful sentiment—but never one's wife, one's mother, one's mate. We need to see how we looked, I thought, behaving as if still under the spell of a religion that made it nearly impossible to love the female body that was our source. (*Same River Twice*, 170)

The womanist novel tradition, as Walker practices it, posits a form of her mother-earth theology as a replacement for patriarchal forms of Black Nationalism and a brand of toxic Black masculinity engendered within many African-American institutions and social movements. It is also a response to white racism because white male monotheism had been taken for granted for so long in western culture that the imaging of God solely

through one gender was not even recognized as a problem in groups like the Nation of Islam and the Five Percent Nation. The problems of this schema are exemplified in how male dominance becomes reified in simple practices like the name choice of the Five Percenters. In the early 1980s, a schism within the Five Percenters changed Smith's original nomenclature from "God's and Goddesses" to "Gods and Earths" to reflect the different natures of men and women and women's attachment to male leaders. This was in direct response to the ideological conflict between various Black Nationalist and feminist rhetorics. God and Goddess are co-equals, yet the Earth is subject to the higher power of God: men. Although Five Percent rhetoric extols the virtues of women as "co-owner, co-maker, and cream of the planet Earth," women's role in society is primarily that of a "child-bearer" made to "revolve around a man" (Black 35-36). Queen Natural, a member of the Nation of the Gods and Earths, elaborates:

First and foremost, as the Mother of Civilization, I am the bearer of life on the planet earth. Symbolically, Earth is the only planet which carries life and gets its food and energy from the sun. So as the Original Woman, I, too, carry life and also get my food (knowledge) from the center of my universe – the Black man (sun). As the Original Woman, I am Queen who acknowledges God and builds beside him in order to create peace and destroy lies and falsehoods taught to our children by the 85ers and the Ten Percenters. I keep the home and my children, as well as help my Black Man sustain the family. SECONDARY, BUT ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY!! (qtd in Black 40-41)

Queen Natural's perspective exposes gender normativity within the theology of the Five Percenters. As progressive as the Five Percent Nation may seem about race, their rhetoric is unequivocally caught in the patriarchal gaze of western monotheism in its view of women. Implicit in the example cited is a hierarchical relationship that automatically

places women in the junior position next to their male counterparts, “secondary, but absolutely necessary.” Women are also seen as pro-creating functionaries, chained and subject to the domestic sphere. This problem is more than ideological; it often masks physical and sexual abuse by giving these practices theological sanction in ways similar to other religions.⁵² This chapter posits that Walker is deeply engaged with the connection between Christian theology and misogyny within *The Color Purple*. The following discussion demonstrates that Walker wrote theology and misogyny into her text to highlight their contribution to the erosion of Black male and female relationships. This erosion is framed within an Ethiopianist Pan-Africanism that I will define to better contextualize Walker’s womanist rhetoric as it operates as a Black God trope within *The Color Purple*. I conclude this chapter with a rhetorical analysis of Celie, Shug Avery, and Nettie, examining their connection to my rhetorical framing of the text.

Alice Walker’s New Religious Vision

In her 1996 memoir, *The Same River Twice*, Walker points directly to patriarchal abuse of religions as the social impetus for the thematic scope of *The Color Purple* by noting: “Men and their religions have tended to make love of anything and anybody other than themselves and their Gods an objectionable thing, shame. But that is not the message of Nature, the Universe, the Earth or of the unindoctrinated Human Heart” (171). This observation emphasizes that Walker’s rhetorical arguments about religion and patriarchy provide an important juxtaposition to the characters and plot development in her novel.

⁵² This is not meant to imply that religion causes abusive behavior but religious ethos in the formation of family, and the values associated with the notion, do often mask abusive behavior. See Nason-Clark, 303-310.

Approaching the text this way provides a richer understanding of the Black God trope as it happens in *The Color Purple*. This chapter demonstrates that Walker uses her Black God trope in *The Color Purple* to actively critique the intersections between race, gender, and religious values by taking on the Christian church and white patriarchy through her narrative about Black relationships. Walker writes a new religious vision, based on worship of Mother Earth to affect this perspective because, “All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them, and likes them” (*The Color Purple* 33). This purpose, woven into the characters of her novel, offers an intersectional critique of white male monotheism from an Ethiopianist perspective. Traditional expressions of Ethiopianism uphold male monotheism. Destiny is providence of the Father: “For Walker, the battle against patriarchal society and its multiple sins of sexism, racism, classism and homophobia (among others) needs the womanist spirit of defiance and irreverence, on the one hand, and the desire for social integration, on the other” (Allan 120). In her own words, Walker’s religious worldview includes critiques of Christianity and is more “female-reverencing” than the patriarchal Black Nationalist discourses. Her articulation of womanist theology in “The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven is You’ve Been Driven Out Your Mind” explicates the ancestral worship *The Color Purple* dramatizes:

It is fatal to love a God who does not love you. A God specifically created to comfort, lead, advise, strengthen, and enlarge the tribal borders of someone else. We have been beggars at the table of a religion that sanctioned our destruction. Our own religions denied, forgot our own ancestral connections to All Creation something of which we are ashamed. I maintain that we are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors; that we must lively them up within ourselves, and begin to see them as whole and necessary and correct: their Earth-

centered, female-reverencing religions, like their architecture, agriculture, and music, suited perfectly to the lives they led. And lead, those who are left, today. I further maintain that the Jesus most of us have been brought up to adore must be expanded to include the "wizard" and the dancer, and that when this is done, it becomes clear that he coexists quite easily with pagan indigenous peoples. Indeed, it was because the teachings of Jesus were already familiar to many of our ancestors, especially in the New World—they already practiced the love and sharing that he preached—that the Christian church was able to make as many genuine converts to the Christian religion as it did. (33)

Walker is suggesting a type of mental decolonizing that echoes much of what has been said by the rhetors explored earlier with the difference that Walker is willing to abandon all religious pretense and critique male patriarchy alongside racist Christian theology. She is not willing to give up the Christian thematic of love, however, or stray too far from its imagery to make her argument, even after she claims to see life from her viewpoint. But she is willing to include “the wizard” and “the dancer” into communion with Jesus and the pagans. This is significant because her secular rejection of theology is later reified in *The Color Purple* and helps inspire 1990s Christian theologians like Kelli Brown Douglass. The cyclical relationship between womanism and womanist theology underscores the blurred lines between sacred and secular rhetorics within many African-American discourses. Walker’s theological rhetoric aims at inclusion, diversity, and individuality amid the safety of an earth-bound caring collective:

One begins to see the world from one's own point of view; to interact with it out of one's own conscience and heart. One's own ‘pagan’ Earth spirit. We begin to flow, again, with and into the Universe. And out of this flowing comes the natural activism of wanting to survive, to be happy, to enjoy one another and Life, and to laugh. We begin to distinguish between the need, singly, to throw rocks at whatever is oppressing us, and the creative joy that arises when we bring our collective stones of resistance against injustice together. We begin to see that we must be loved very much by whatever Creation is, to find ourselves on this

wonderful Earth. We begin to recognize our sweet, generously appointed place in the makeup of the Cosmos. We begin to feel glad, and grateful that we are not in heaven but that we are here. (“Only Reason” 33)

Walker’s collective also fights against “injustice together” and “throws rocks at whatever is oppressing us,” even when that oppression is coming from religious institutions like the church (33). This didactic position runs throughout *The Color Purple*, which is Walker’s definitive novel on womanist theology. In it, she uses the Black God trope to critique African-American men for the physical and sexual abuse that they perpetuate in the domestic sphere. But Walker says she also created the novel to explore how white supremacy affected Black relationships (Barker 55).

The novel uses Ethiopianism and theodicy as rhetorical strategies to connect Black men’s abuse of Black women to white supremacy. Walker writes the concepts as interrelated in their explication of Black women’s suffering. Ethiopianism is a theological perspective that focuses on the redemptive suffering of Africans. Theodicy asks the question: Why does God continue to let evil persist? Walker blends these two thematic strands together to offer an answer: Because we let evil persist by not seeing its connection to the evil that men do and to the stifling of female spiritual growth. Suffering is transformative in *The Color Purple* and infused with a telos of hope and wholeness rooted in Christian aesthetic logic (F. Smith 109-111). Celie, Shug, Sophia, and Squeak find themselves by claiming their self-worth after tremendous, undeserved suffering. By claiming self-worth for their lives Walker suggests that these women are better able to cope with and challenge the immediate oppressions surrounding them. Her female characters transform the suffering and oppression that surrounds them into a catalyst for

self-actualization. It is through their “shared oppression” that “they collectively gain the strength to separate themselves from the bondage of their past and piece together a free and equal existence for themselves and for those they love” (Barker 55). Rhetorically, they find themselves, each other, and spiritual growth through their suffering. This Christian notion is framed in the experience of Black women to make the theme intelligible to readers who are able to see it in the embodied rhetoric of African-American womanism.

This rhetorical reading is supported by Walker. She says of the religious aspects of her novel that she recognizes the sway Christianity has had over Black people’s lives but believes that religion has somehow sapped the vitality out of the community and only a reclaiming of selfhood gained through counter-myth can recover what is missing:

Looking back on my parents' and grandparents' lives, I have felt overwhelmed, helpless, as I've examined history and society, and especially religion, with them in mind, and have seen how they were manipulated away from a belief in their own judgment and faith in themselves.

It is painful to realize they were forever trying to correct a "flaw"—that of being black, female, human—that did not exist, except as "men of God," but really men of greed, misogyny, and violence, defined it. What a burden to think one is conceived in sin rather than in pleasure; that one is born into evil rather than into joy. In my work, I speak to my parents and to my most distant ancestors about what I myself have found as an Earthling growing naturally out of the Universe. I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of immediate ancestors, characters who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the "religion" by which they must guide their lives. (“Only Reason” 30)

The Color Purple argues that Celie is able to “correct the flaw” and find wholeness after suffering and “the discovery of what is vital in the world” which is that she can, and must, function independent of men, white people, and the distant creator god of the Christian church. Celie ends the novel living interdependent with men and white people, but Walker writes her as an economically and socially autonomous agent to underscore the correlation between her changed social status and religious perspective. Walker uses *The Color Purple* to collapse “male-erected boundaries that separate woman from herself” and keep the marginalized from having a voice. She views the collapse of these boundaries as a “necessary first step toward coalition building” that women must undergo “before they can be part of a wholeness” (Allan 133). Speech or the end of silence is the key marker of female selfhood. Celie’s reunion with her sister Nettie is, for example, a symbolic return to her ancestral home and a reclaiming of herself and her voice, independent of the church, white people, and Black male patriarchy (135). The symbolic return of an African mother to mother Africa signals a reunification of the self to wholeness.

Alice Walker’s Womanism and the Ethiopianist Tradition

Womanist theology as a rhetorical framework, reconsiders and revises Christianity’s traditions, practices, scriptures, and Biblical interpretation with a special lens to empower and liberate African-American women and people of color in America (D. Williams 180-182). *The Color Purple* can be read and interpreted through this rhetorical lens. Following the novel’s language about God, it becomes clear that Walker’s womanist theology associates with and departs from patriarchal theological perspectives

by foregrounding the perspectives and experiences of African-American women in its vision. Womanist theology is strongly associated with Black feminism, but it is not only for African women; it attempts to embrace women of color all over the world (182). Walker's theology recognizes that race difference between Blacks and whites hinges on the importance of African blood, not European. Contrary to other writers, she inflects this difference as a gift rather than a curse.⁵³ In *The Color Purple*'s rhetorical universe, as Walker alluded to earlier, the fractured family relations that create the tension of the novel are at their root the result of slavery, racism, and a warped mimicry of white American culture by the African-American lower- and middle-classes. Walker's Black Nationalist stance is similar to that mentioned in *The Salt Eaters* and *Beloved*. Black people must come to terms with the horrors of their American past and remember that it is connected to a much older African heritage that exists beyond Christianity and the European encounter, and that it provides the strength needed to conquer the contemporary moment. Ethiopianism, as Walker uses it in *The Color Purple*, echoes the philosophical belief that the removal of Africans into the diaspora has had a violent but redemptive trajectory, if African-Americans recognize their African specialness. Ethiopianism is used to rationalize questions of theodicy related to the African-American experience. Why has God seemingly ordained the polyvalent suffering within the African-American experience? Walker explores this broad question through the exposition of one overlooked life, a married Black woman in the rural south at the turn of

⁵³ See Chestnutt's "What is a White Man" where he notes that legal designation of "whiteness" varies in United States based on legal jurisdiction, and that the critical difference between "races" in America hinges upon African blood contained within an individual citizen. The differences in outlook upon Africa between Chestnutt and Walker is in part a result of the way race functions in the social milieu they are writing within.

the twentieth century. Walker challenges the notion that God's goodness is made manifest through the work he performs to reduce and mitigate human suffering.⁵⁴ She does away with this cause-effect relationship between God and suffering and places the blame and relief for human suffering squarely on the shoulders of the human beings in her novel who perpetuate and endure it. The novel suggests that suffering as it is experienced by the characters in the story precludes personal growth and a positive ending. For Walker, this suffering is not written as a necessary component of salvation or redemption; her novel instead argues against suffering as necessary to the revelation of God. Walker's Black God trope is revealed to Celie through her relationships with Shug and Nettie, who help her process her suffering. God, and its tropological Blackness, is revealed to readers through a process of discovery embedded in the epistolary monologue Celie has with the God of her Christian upbringing.

Ethiopianism is a Black Nationalist ideology and rhetorical strategy that influenced African-American literature through the shared political and religious experiences of English-speaking Africans during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The name Ethiopianism is derived from Psalm 68:31, which suggests that Ethiopia (read as Africa) will one day be redeemed by princes who "come out of Egypt" to stretch out their hands to God (Davis 3). Much like the Curse of Ham myth, this scripture was imbued with its own racialized mythos over time and used to create both racist and abolitionist rhetorics.⁵⁵ This passage was sometimes interpreted as a prophecy

⁵⁴ See Jones' *Is God A White Racist*, p. 3-23, for an examination of this perspective.

⁵⁵ The Niagara movement was Ethiopianist in their programmatic outlook and political philosophy. Du Bois's novel *Dark Princess* is Ethiopianist in its plot structure and thematic.

that Africa would soon be saved from the darkness of heathenism or as a promise of dramatic political, industrial, and economic renaissance on the continent. Others insisted that the real meaning of the scripture is that someday Black people would again rule the world, thus reversing white supremacy (Pinn 136-137). As Africans in the New World converted to Christianity, many used Biblical paradigms and prophesy to interpret Black experiences like the rhetorical strategy Phyllis Wheatley used in “On Coming to America from Africa.” In the nineteenth century, African-American authors conflated slavery and manifest destiny in the service of liberation to help fuel abolitionist and immigration movements. In the late twentieth century, Walker is using the same Biblical tradition to espouse a womanism of her own making. Ethiopianists look toward a more positive future using a Pan-Africanist interpretation of history and experience to get there. The connection of all people of African descent as “Ethiopians” and heirs of a history other than heathenism and savagery, and most important a promise for a revived future, is a major reason that slavery’s telos was read through Psalm 68:31.

While nineteenth-century interpretations of this Biblical passage differed widely, the main themes that emerged for African-Americans were that Ethiopia was a symbol for all Africans, that God had prophesied the redemption of Africa, and that the mission of those for African descent was to work towards this redemption. Ethiopianists asserted that Africans, although historically devalued by whites, would eventually rise to the greatness the people of the continent achieved before their encounter with Europeans. It was important for African-Americans who used Ethiopianism to reclaim a civilized past for Africa and to refute charges of inherent African inferiority promoted through

racialized social Darwinism. The redemption of Africa parallels redemption for those of the African Diaspora, debased through their scattering from the homeland by the shame and stigma of New World slavery. In an attempt to connect their present condition of oppression to a Biblical promise of hope, many African-Americans connected what they knew of their history to the Christian idea of the “fortunate fall” or “redemptive suffering.” Thus, many African-Americans, enlightened by Christianity, assumed they would return to Africa and revive a continent that was debased by either its natural backwardness or its adoption of idolatry years before. This type of missionary zeal was embraced by Black Nationalist movements like Garveyism and the Niagara Movement, but Walker’s Ethiopianism works against the notion that human fault lies in God’s plan for Africa or Africans. This missionary zeal is signified against in *The Color Purple*. Nettie’s missionary work in West Africa is spurred on by the redemptive mission of late century Christianized African-Americans re-emigrating to Africa, but Walker uses the church only as a plot device to introduce her own mother-earth theology rooted in womanism.

Ethiopianism as it is used in *The Color Purple* echoes the philosophical belief that the removal of Africans into the diaspora had a redemptive telos, if African-Americans give up the violent self-hatred they learned in America and return to a recognition of their African specialness. Celie exemplifies this by engaging in a Pan-Africanist reclaiming of herself that culminates in reconnection with Africa, not a benevolent converting of Africans away from paganism. By ridding herself of Christian monotheism as the guide to her social behavior Celie transforms her demoralizing years with Albert into a crucible

that requires an end rather than it being her divine lot in life. Nettie's missionary work in West Africa underscores this reading. For example, her sojourn to Africa is paid for by the redemptive mission of Black Christians re-emigrating to Africa. The experience changes Nettie's views about God as taught in America, steering her towards Walker's womanist religious perspective. Nettie even says, "God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal" (*The Color Purple* 261).

Like Bambara, Walker's spirituality relies upon a connection to the past to create a path that leads to self-actualization in the present. Ethiopianism is signified in this passage, and throughout the novel, as a means of subverting both white and Black western notions of redemptive suffering by using the concept to indict rather than rationalize or justify western patriarchal superiority. For Walker, God is not a retributive white man that judges the lowly from on high, rather "it" is "more spirit than ever before, and more internal" (261). The redemption of Africa in the novel parallels the redemption for those of African descent, debased through their scattering from the homeland and the shame of American slavery. Ethiopianism is used here to indict rather than rationalize or justify slavery. Africa is inverted into a place of peace, hope, and wholeness, while America is a place of oppression. Celie's Ethiopianist conversation with God is a central heteroglossic (or conversation within a conversation) narrative discourse within the text that runs parallel to her journey of self-discovery. What follows is an analysis of Celie's heteroglossic discourse in light of its creation of a Black God trope in the novel.

The Color Purple's Black God Trope

Walker creates her Black God trope by dramatizing her theological position through Celie's recounting of her relationships with God, Shug Avery, and her sister Nettie. Walker uses these relationship networks to explore and critique the concepts of patriarchy and redemptive suffering through her female characters. In doing this, Walker is able to place herself in the prophetic role of a Black public speaker by voicing Black Nationalist discourse through Celie's recounting of her life and community. That it is a Black woman retelling her own story, and the stories of others, underscores Walker's didactic point about African-American women's voices and agency within American culture. Similar to Morrison's construction of Baby Suggs as a prophetic voice, Walker is using Celie to reclaim voice and agency from a hyper-marginalized space, the suffering of a Black woman in the segregated South. Redemptive suffering, as expressed through Walker's Ethiopianist lens, manifests itself as a discourse on theodicy, Afrocentrism, and self-actualization. Theodicy, the ethical questioning of evil's place in a world created and controlled by God, is a thematic that permeates the novel's critique of patriarchy. Celie's relationship with her step-father, Albert, and the patriarchal God of traditional Christianity are three examples of where this discourse takes place in the novel. This chapter focuses solely on the latter for the sake of scope. Afrocentrism can be seen in the novel's vaunted construction of Africa as a place of escape, refuge, and renewal. Walker's construction of Africa as Nettie's escape from persecution mirrors the Bible's construction of Africa as a place of refuge for important characters like the prophet Joseph and Jesus. Walker dramatizes this through Celie's discourse about Nettie, her

estranged sister, and the epistolary relationship between the two that develops over the course of novel. Self-love is the ultimate trajectory of Walker's womanist rhetoric in the novel. Celie's learned self-love mirrors the self-love Walker hopes to inspire within the Black community in both individuals and the group. Her various constructions of a Black God attest to her novel's notion of self-love. Walker locates her womanist Black God trope in the vernacular culture of Black women, recognizing God as a sense-making tool within their speech community (Allan 119). Accessing a vernacular logic that transgresses beyond the espoused morality of white Christian traditions in its dealings with the world allows Walker to use *The Color Purple* as rhetoric that speaks to and for Black America from a Black woman's position. Unlike Muhammad, Walker does not purport to speak for all Black people, rather she seeks to speak to all African-Americans through a representative version of one African-American's experience. Walker's womanist rhetorical approach, in the form of Celie, foregrounds the centrality of Black women as a marginalized voice, within a marginalized discourse community.

Walker's rhetoric in *The Color Purple* promotes unity among Africans in the United States and the diaspora. To that end, her novel is imbued subtly with a Pan-Africanist vision that repudiates notions of white supremacy, while not attacking it expressly. The attack is seen through Walker connecting Celie's spiritual awakening to her relationships with Shug Avery and her sister Nettie in Africa. Celie's epistolary relationship with God transforms along the same arch as her personal growth fueled by her relationship with Shug. As Celie grows to love Shug and herself she becomes less dependent on her relationship with a distant patriarchal god and seems to favor a more

African-centered mother-earth deity represented by nature but discursively constructed through her retelling of her conversations with Shug. For example, Shug tells Celie:

God ain't a he or a she, but a It. But what do it look like? I ask. Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it. (89)

Although the idea is Shug's, it is constructed in the text as Celie's written memory.

Throughout the novel, Walker's Black God trope is seen in Celie's reconstruction of God through her recollection of conversations with Shug. Their transfiguring of God into an "It" rather than a "he" or "she" destabilizes anthropomorphic notions of the deity that create a gendered ideological struggle within Black Nationalist conversations about religion. Read this way, Walker's Black God trope is offering a gendered critique of western patriarchy. Similarly, not worrying about what "It" looks like undercuts conversations about God's race in reference to humanity. This slight insertion into the text offers a counterpoint to both the white and Black theologies that were posited in earlier chapters.

God's racial ambiguity notwithstanding, Walker nonetheless upholds racial categories, and makes known her Black Nationalist agenda embedding it within her womanist constructions of God throughout the text. For example, Celie's disbelief in a white male God is Walker voicing a critique of the hegemonic control white male patriarchy has over society, as shown here:

Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make...Still, it is like Shug say, You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall. Man corrupt everything, say Shug...He try to make you think he everywhere...Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. (197)

Again, the novel as a form, speaking through the enthymeme of a character, gives Walker freedom to inhabit the public prophetic space of jeremiad judgment similar to the Black Nationalist rhetors covered in earlier chapters. Chasing “that old white man out my head” is an allusion to the psychological trauma of slavery, and its continued weight upon the collective psyche of the African-Americans purported by Akbar, Muhammad, Cone and others. Walker supplants the old white man with self-affirming female relationships, reminding readers “you think he God. But he ain’t.”

Two of the most telling critiques of the racist patriarchy taught by the traditional Christian church is when Walker writes, “People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back” (196). And, when Celie flat out rejects a Christian God saying, “I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (175). These sentiments correspond to another conversation with Shug that Celie recollects, where the former excoriates white male monotheism and hints at its hegemonic control over Black people’s lives:

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up the flowers, wind, water, a big rock. (179)

As this passage demonstrates, Walker's rhetoric in *The Color Purple* dramatizes her own war with Christianity and patriarchy by weaving her ideas about a Black God throughout her text. Walker uses her female protagonists, Celie and Shug, to persuade readers to understand Christian religious rhetoric as a flawed, but almost indispensable survival tool. Celie's comment that "it ain't easy, trying to do without God even if you know he ain't there, trying to do with him is a strain" underscores this point (123), and it aligns with Nelle Morton's testimony cited earlier in chapter 4.

Walker's womanist argument challenges the moral goodness of a Christian God that ignores and sanctions the abuse of Black women, framing her challenge within the Christian theological position that God is letting the evil of America happen for a reformatory purpose. As Walker dramatizes them, the evils of racism and sexism are symptoms of moral decline and are not a part of the natural order of the world, they are imposed onto the world by male influence over human relationships. Walker dramatizes the particular exploitation of Black women as racially stigmatized, sexually subjugated subjects in America to emphasize that those roles are not fixed to race or gender and are a part of the process of overcoming the man-made evil displayed within the novel.

Walker's womanism considers the efficacy of Black women's responses as important, so she gives suffering preeminence because it is the stimulus for a response that reflects her rhetorical argument. In much the same way as the suffering of Africa sets the stage for its redemption, so too does the suffering of women set the stage for a challenge to male patriarchal control. Walker says that she wrote Celie's character to speak to and for her ancestors who "were forever trying to correct a 'flaw'—that of being Black, female, and

human—that did not exist, except as ‘men of God,’ but really men of greed, misogyny, and violence, defined it” (“Only Reason” 30). Walker constructs Celie as a noble archetype of a Black woman to show how African-Americans embody the irony of America’s flawed racist and sexist logic, commenting in her essay:

I create characters who sometimes speak in the language of immediate ancestors, characters who are not passive but active in the discovery of what is vital and real in this world. Characters who explore what it would feel like not to be imprisoned by the hatred of women, the love of violence, and the destructiveness of greed taught to human beings as the "religion" by which they must guide their lives. (“Only Reason” 30)

Walker heavy-handedly writes womanism into Celie and Shug’s characters to elicit a sympathetic ethos for her primary ideological spokespersons. The novel states its womanist rhetoric through her clearly when Celie articulates: “God ain’t a he or a she, but a It” (*The Color Purple* 196). Shug is attributed with telling Celie that God “Don’t look like nothing” because “it ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself” (196). Walker’s Black God trope is “Everything that is or ever was or ever will be” and “when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found it” (125). This sentiment is amplified when Celie says:

Here’s the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. (196)

In all these examples, Walker’s words reflect a deeper meaning than the immediate context of the scene provides. Taken together, however, these instances of God-talk in the

novel foreshadow the womanist discourses expressed by other feminists like Morton and Douglass, as well as Black Nationalist theologians like Muhammad and Cone.

That all of Walker's God-talk in the novel refers back to Africa is evidenced in Nettie's veritable cosign of Celie and Shug's Black Nationalist religious rhetoric. Her religious commentary plays counterpoint to Celie's theologizing when she says: "God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone – a roof leaf or Christ – but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us" (*The Color Purple* 261). Walker uses Nettie to allow for multiple womanist theologies to abound rather than simply replacing one monotheism for another. Contradictions exist between Nettie's and Celie's rhetoric that their constructions of God reveal. "God is different to us now," is Nettie distancing herself from the traditional African-American Church. "Most people think he has to look like something" is a jab at the United States and its anthropomorphic quest to racialize God and Jesus. Nettie has seemingly overcome Celie's conundrum ridding her worldview of the white man. The most notable difference between the sisters is that Nettie's African Black God is still an external spirit, internalized. Celie's American Black God is an internal spirit, externally manifested in people's participation in communal love and growth, Walker's Black God trope. Celie's reimagined Black God is connected to Nettie's theology, but something totally its own because Celie's experience is entrenched within American patriarchal brutality. Walker's rhetorical choice suggests that the problem of humanity is not a disconnect between humans and an independent spirit; rather, the problem is a disconnect between the

interdependent spirits of humans living in community with one another. This point is highlighted by the positionality of each of her female characters and their relationship to her womanist theology. Celie offers the clearest example, but Shug and Nettie are indispensable to understanding the novel from this perspective.

Walker's novel uses these characters' arguments about God as a reoccurring theme to juxtapose womanist rhetoric against traditional notions of God to signal a disharmony between African-Americans. Her position suggests that African Americans, especially Black women, are a gift to humanity, not its curse. In the novel, healing and renewal come to the community through a type of personal harmony achieved by the protagonist. This harmony is a direct result of Celie balancing her own understanding of America and Africa, resisting Black male patriarchy, rejecting white normative values that link her femininity to children and the home space, thinking for herself beyond what Christianity taught her about humanity, and embracing her personal connection to Africa through Nettie. The novel's rhetorical framing of God suggests that division among the Black family leads to communal collapse, but unity and mutual respect can subvert the dysfunction caused by internalizing white supremacy.

Celie's awakening to do without a white God reflects Walker's hope for "decolonizing the spirit" of both her protagonist and her African-American audience. Walker contends that, when "one truly does possess a third eye, and [when] this eye opens," a person begins to "see the world from a different point of view" and "interact with it out of one's own conscience and heart" ("Driven Out Your Mind" 33). Once this happens, "the natural activism of wanting to survive, to be happy, to enjoy one another

and life, and to laugh” starts, and African Americans “begin to distinguish between the need, singly, to throw rocks at whatever is oppressing us, and the creative joy that arises when we bring our collective stones of resistance against injustice together” (33). It is here, “We begin to see that we must be loved very much by whatever Creation is, to find ourselves on this wonderful Earth. We begin to recognize our sweet, generously appointed place in the makeup of the Cosmos. We begin to feel glad, and grateful that we are not in heaven but that we are *here*” (33). Walker constructs Celie as a noble archetype of a Black woman to show how all African Americans as human social subjects embody the irony of America’s flawed racist and sexist logic. Celie is a woman subjugated to white authority and male authority, represented through her abusive husband that she has no social, legal, or economic defense from or recourse against.

Celie, Shug, and Nettie are engaged in a type of Pan-Africanist reclaiming of their selves, a type of self-healing rooted in self-love and gained through seeing God independent of the Christian church. Shug’s statement that “God is inside you and inside everybody else” is Walker’s attempt at a humanistic mantra. The epistolary conversation with God she weaves throughout the narrative betrays the logic of redemptive suffering bound up within the novel. As Celie grows less dependent on a distant white patriarchal God, she simultaneously grows to love Shug and herself more and becomes less dependent on her abusive relationship with Albert. She awakens to favor a more African-centered mother-earth deity represented by herself, Shug, and her sister Nettie, Walker’s Black God trope. *The Color Purple* allows Walker to voice her brand of Black Nationalist religious rhetoric, to revise Ethiopianism tenets, and to illuminate the

narrative inversion of the white western aesthetic through literary discourse as a strategy of resistance. Similar to Baby Suggs's sermon in *Beloved* and the mud mothers in *The Salt Eaters*, *The Color Purple* offers a gendered Black Nationalist critique of American society, rooted in healing human self-hatred. *The Color Purple* offers fresh insight into the Black God trope in a more clear and full-bodied manner than *The Salt Eaters* or *Beloved*. Walker's Black God trope runs the course of her novel and is in fact a central theme of the text. Using Celie's awakening, Walker substitutes an immaterial white God for a material Black God who is realized through Black womanhood.

The rhetoric of *The Salt Eaters*, *Beloved*, and *The Color Purple* dramatizes the theme that God is analogous to a conversation about African-American oppression and liberation. Similar themes are present in the rhetoric of *Message to the Blackman in America* and "The 120 Lessons." Although each author displays the Black God trope differently, all use the religious rhetoric of their writings to combat negative stereotypes concerning African-American intelligence, gender roles, and voice in the public and private spheres. Their work as rhetors aligns in that all use the Black God trope to address America's failure to understand African Americans on their own terms which has perpetuated white male hegemony to its limits in the modern era, and these rhetors seek to critique that phenomena through an in-group discourse about human relationships. These rhetors foreground a barrier between African-American communicators and the racist world that they inhabit, on all levels of experience, that has inhibited the United States from overcoming the color line W.E. B Du Bois anticipated was the greatest single threat to democracy in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, the color line has

morphed into a communication line that understands that racial rhetoric is socially constructed but upholds those constructions as valuable. The jeremiad tradition that Elijah Muhammad and Clarence Smith draw upon is rooted in the America's racialized Christian rhetorical tradition. Their quasi-Islamic rhetorical formulations of God denote African-Americans' legal and social separation from white Americans amid the turmoil of Civil Rights and early integration efforts. The novels examined in this dissertation compliment the Black Nationalist jeremiad by demonstrating that the Black God trope functions in multiple genres of African-American rhetoric. They also demonstrate how race functions as a cultural tool to combat white hegemony in addition to its role in oppression. Womanism, as Walker, Morrison, and Bambara practice it, aids in understanding why the relationship between aesthetics and material culture is vital to subverting white hegemony (Eagleton 4).

In this study, the Black God trope is theorized as a rhetorically constituted phenomenon created through rhetorical strategies that target African-American audience members, but it can also be accessed by anyone culturally rooted in the terms of the conversation. These strategies were mapped out by examining the language rhetors used to communicate with their presumed Black audience. The Black God trope allows Black Nationalist rhetors and their African-American audiences to connect in discursive formation among white people. This dissertation demonstrates the rhetorical connection between disparate articulations of Black Nationalism that use tropological language about God and other religious figures to persuade their intended audience. Even in written form, every utterance contains multiple meanings outside its surface signification.

Analyzing different examples of Black writers writing to a presumably Black audience demonstrates how these authors shared similar “patterns perspectives, concepts, or themes” when crafting their rhetoric. A final example, given in the next chapter, concludes this thesis.

CHAPTER VI

THE BLACK GOD TROPE AS BLACK NATIONALIST RELIGIOUS RHETORIC

The preceding chapters demonstrate that the Black God trope is used by many African-American rhetors as a means of knowing and showing their interpretation of Black rhetorical culture. In the cases of the Yacub narrative, the Fard narrative, the Mud Mothers, Baby Suggs's sermon, and Walker's womanism, a common "terministic enterprise" exists that uses a Black God trope to relate "countless details classifiable under" a "unifying head" that transcends "the many details subsumed under that head, somewhat as spirit is said to transcend matter" (Burke, *Rhetoric* 2-3). Echoed in these examples is Kenneth Burke's observation that "theological principles can be shown to have useable secular analogues that throw light upon the nature of language" (2). The Black God trope weaves Christian theology into the vernacular practices of Black folk creating a rhetoric that strategically inflects social protest and/or cultural resistance.⁵⁶ As such, it allows for ideological diversity, rhetorically agency, and genre versatility.

This dissertation is a brief sketch of the Black God trope as a strategy and method of African-American public rhetoric. The questions that this dissertation addresses are: What cultural values are implicit in the rhetorical situation that makes the Black God trope an appropriate rhetorical strategy? How does the Black God trope operate as a form

⁵⁶ "The very existence of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) inscribes a significant rhetorical" character to all African-American creative production. See Gilyard's "Introduction: Aspects of African-American Rhetorical Field" in *African-American Rhetorics: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*.

of resistance to the dominant racialized patriarchal discourse? What are the exigencies for a rhetor who uses the Black God trope to engage an audience? Across this dissertation, the Black God trope operates dynamically and evolves out of multiple rhetorical situations, both sacred and secular. A final example highlights the trope's applicability to African-American literature and religious rhetoric alike. James Weldon Johnson's pro-Christian collection of poetry *God's Trombones* (1927) adds a final contrast to the other rhetoric examined here by demonstrating that the Black God trope is a dynamic method of resistance applied to many different rhetorical situations. Johnson's work is not Black Nationalist in tone or purpose per se; however, his verse poetry in this collection intentionally echoes a positive image of African-Americans while also signifying a positive relationship with the Christian rhetoric it imitates. In contrast to the rhetors studied in previous chapters, Johnson views the Black male preacher and Christian message as self-affirming institutions and uses a rhetorical representation of the Black preacher to argue for the dignity of African-American culture both to Black and white readers.

James Weldon Johnson's Black God Trope in *God's Trombones*

In his preface to *God's Trombones*, Johnson explains that the poems contained in the work grew from his appreciation of the Negro preacher, both as an orator and an actor (J.W. Johnson 1-8). This curious point demonstrates his rhetorical understanding of the African-American church and its most prominent leadership figure, the preacher, as an

embodied rhetoric that he textualizes.⁵⁷ Johnson writes from the position of a race leader and writer of African-American culture. He knows that his presentation of the race argues against white supremacy and defines what the race looks like. In writing *God's Trombones*, Johnson attempts to "fix something" of the real experience to African-America's historical culture (8). This is evidenced by his use of Biblical images taken from the Black folk church of his childhood to create his verse sermons. For Johnson, the sermon is a public extolling of private communal sentiment, a high-art produced by Negro culture. Much like Baby Suggs in the woods, the preacher is speaking for the community as well as speaking to it through sermons. Johnson, in recreating this dynamic public figure through verse, takes rhetorical liberties with his re-presentation of the Black church sermon, because he understands he is writing about the community to a mixed audience that included those who doubted Negro intelligence and culture.⁵⁸ The "personal and anthropomorphic God" that his verse sermons attempts to re-create grows out of a Black folk church tradition that uses intentionally rhetorical constructions of God to deliver explicit social commentary and critique to its popular audience.

Johnson keeps the tonality of more expressive and musical forms of preaching, like those of the AME, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions, but restrains himself from trying to recreate the vocal mannerism of traditional Black preaching in a strict sense. He intentionally does away with call-and-response, ad libs, and shouting, because as he

⁵⁷ Hamilton recognizes the Black preacher Johnson is recreating as "a kind of celebrity." He explains that "for most years prior to the 1930's and the New Deal, it was quite understandable that the black preacher, as leader of the black church, would be a pivotal figure. The church was pretty much unrivaled in the black community as the major institution of black folk" (13).

⁵⁸ Johnson denotes his mixed reading audience by remembering that "Thousands of people, white and black, flocked to" the Black church in his reconstruction of it (1).

explains there is “no way of re-creating the atmosphere” of a church, or the charisma, physicality, or ethos of a Black preacher during a sermon in writing (7). The four basic narrative elements of a Black sermon: Introduction, Exposition, Whoop/Holler, and the Denouement are built into each of Johnson’s poems though. Each loops and twists and turns differently, with various digressions, associations, repetitions, and alliterations. Strikingly, Johnson’s sermons fit all of these elements into verse form without losing sight of the transfiguring they undergo once committed to print and of the transfiguring they undergo again once they are “intoned.” His point-of-reference for maintaining a balance between these two tensions seems to be his understanding of how to construct a sermon that resonates as authentic to an African-American audience member of the Black folk church. Johnson’s use of the English word as the Word of God shows his familiarity with, and reliance upon, a Black God trope to weave his narratives. For him, the Word given through preaching creates and recreates a sentimental connection between the speaker and the audience by creating a shared vision of history and temporality. Johnson as a writer is charged with recreating that sentimental connection.

During live sermons, the vitality of the person performing the Word is as much a part of the message as the text being used. This mix of ethos and discourse blends with the African-American Christian consciousness discussed in chapter 4 to speak to its intended audience. Johnson bridges this gap in authenticity through a skillful use of words that draw on stock narratives familiar to Black Christians (J.W. Johnson 1). He draws upon folk culture interpretations of Christian moral lessons to make a palatable book of verse. Thus, each sermon in *God’s Trombone’s* is constructed to mirror the “high

art” idiom of verse poetry in its reserved formality, while at the same time mirroring the conservative posturing of the institutional Black church’s culture in its ideological framework. In “The Prodigal Son,” the moral high ground that Johnson seeks to place African-American culture upon vis-a-vis wicked Babylon is apparent throughout the text:

Young man, come away from Babylon,
That hell-bordered city of Babylon.
Leave the dancing and gambling of Babylon,
The wine and whiskey of Babylon,
The hot-mouthed women of Babylon;
Fall down on your knees,
And say in your heart:
I will arise and go to my Father (24).

The prodigal son as a protagonist in the poem acts as a terministic stand-in for Black migrants. The moral message mirrors an admonishment to Blacks being seduced by the “lure of Babylon,” read as vice, in their migration North and West at the turn of the century. Vice culture was a common theme in the Black folk church at the time, the phenomena was in part a reaction to urbanization anxiety caused by the Great Migration. The poem collapses “the past with the present in order that a future might be imagined, for God’s activity in history assured African-Americans freedom if they comported to his will” (Glaude 348). Babylon and the wisdom of the father battle for the allegiance of the prodigal son. Eventually, the father’s words, meaning both man’s word and God’s Word, prevails but not before the son experiences the highs and lows of Babylonian seduction. Subtly woven imperceptibly into the text, is a redemptive suffering narrative that focuses the reader’s attention onto the conservative proscriptions of the father’s position. The words of the Father, echoing in the son’s mind, operate as a Black God trope,

reverberating with God the Father's Words, the Bible. Because of the enthymemic power of the Black God trope, "Narrative forms and logical forms merge (or begin to diverge!)" to create "interlocking motivational principles" that are "translated into terms of an irreversible narrative sequence" (Burke, *Rhetoric* 4).

The seven poems in *God's Trombones* take readers through the emotional landscape of the African-American experience, normalizing Johnson's vision of African-American life and culture. They do so by mimicking African-American vernacular culture in ways other than phonetic dialect. Johnson uses the Black God trope to bridge the gap between the written word and living Word by connecting his word choices to a worldview common to the Black folk Christian tradition.⁵⁹ As Burke suggests, "Whatever correspondence there is between the word and the thing it names, the word is not the thing" the logic behind the signifier denotes what is to be signified (18). Words are mutable, situational, and contextual. Johnson's style choices show that he understood this implicitly. He does not limit himself to "naïve verbal realism" when thinking of the word's function in Christian theology or human activity. Rather, he leans on Christian theology and its understanding of the "Word" as also *logos*, both being synonymous with the literal and figurative creation of things. Johnson infuses this quality into his recreation of the Word given through the Black Christian preacher. He relies on stock Biblical characters and broad social themes accessible to both Black and white Christian

⁵⁹ "Word" in the first sense is a wholly naturalistic, empirical reference. "Word" in the second sense are words that describe the supernatural with referents borrowed from the natural world (Burke 7).

audiences to bridge the gap between his potential readers and the world he would like them to see.

Johnson's Black God trope is demonstrated through his uses of Biblical figures to deliver communal messages similar to that of a traditional African-American sermon. Johnson's themes, word choices, and writing stylizations translate into God's Word by drawing on a personal knowledge of the Black Christian experience, inside and outside of the church. His excessive use of the exclamation point and dash mark, as examples, rhetorically symbolize movements within a preacher's sermon that require a shout or pause or dramatic effect and audience participation (8). God and other Biblical figures operate as terministic screens, or terms that represent larger ideas in *God's Trombones*. In Johnson's poems, God's relationship to humanity is a means of discussing his contemporary African-American relationship to the world. For example, in "Let My People Go," Johnson uses an Ethiopianist reading of Exodus to speak to, and speak for, the African-American experience. His sermon about Moses, Egypt, the Hebrews, and Exodus is a language system that is a fusion of myth, symbol, language, and action. The poem's final stanza is a moral lesson to white people about Black people that demonstrates this point:

Listen!- Listen!
All you sons of Pharaoh.
Who do you think can hold God's people
When the Lord God himself has said,
Let my people go? (53)

Throughout this poem Pharaoh and the sons of Pharaoh operate as signifiers of white people and whiteness as social positions. Similarly, “God’s People,” the “Hebrew Children,” “Israel,” and similar referents operate as significations of Black people and Blackness as social positions. Johnson’s sociological rendering of the Exodus narrative creates a rhetorical power shift between the antagonist and protagonist by the end of the narrative. Not lost on Black or white Christian audiences, “the Lord,” the final arbiter of human morality and action commands, “Let my people go.” Johnson’s rhetorical positioning of Israel and Egypt creates a redemptive suffering narrative that cleaves rhetorical Black people away from their oppressors at a historical moment when he is trying to do the same himself through the act of writing and publishing. As argued through numerous examples across this dissertation, texts like Johnson’s carry within them an intense intertextual conversation with the world within which they were produced from an African-American perspective and use God and other Biblical figures as a trope to do so. Read this way, Biblical narrative and confession are “the necessary components for the formation of coherent selfhood” because “mirroring, twinship, and idealization are wrapped up in the polyvalent experience of the transfigured communal context of worship” (M. Johnson, “Lord of the Crucified,” 28).

Burke’s “logology” or “studies in words-about-words” provides an understanding of religious language as Johnson employs the Black God trope (*Rhetoric* vi). Burke argues that “God terms” are so “ultimate” or “radical” a subject, that they “almost necessarily” become examples of “words used with thoroughness. Since words-about-God would be as far-reaching as words can be” (2) the relationship between “God terms”

and “the countless details classifiable under its ‘unifying head’ could be said to ‘transcend’ the many details subsumed under that head, somewhat as spirit is said to transcend matter” (2-3). *God’s Trombones* and the other examples of Black religious rhetoric examined here demonstrate this by subsuming the broad and varied social aims of each author into the framework of Christian symbolism. Words like “God,” “Jesus,” “Moses,” and “Pharaoh” are particularly meaningful for African-American rhetors because they can be used as a meta-language that conjures images and ideas that induce support of an affirming Black worldview rather than a degenerative view of the African-American experience. This form of Black Nationalism is the cognitive analog of material ethos, the two maintaining a cyclical relationship that influences social behavior using symbol systems, like religion, writing, and language to connect surface performance to deeper cultural meaning (Geertz 250).

African-American rhetors routinely link the image of God, Jesus, Moses and other Biblical characters together with the image of Black people in contemporary America. Oftentimes, this synthesis is achieved by means of folklore tales based on church myth. Black church folklore is both sacred and secular, meaning it is told inside and outside of traditional Christian church settings by preachers and laity alike. Often contained within this folklore is a rhetoric of what Black culture is and is not. African-Americans use folklore to tell one another stories about their religion and their relationship to the world. One of the goals of this church folklore is to create a counter-theology in hopes that new myths can bring the Protestant rhetoric of liberty and salvation closer to the African-American experience of bondage, discrimination, and oppression. Johnson’s “The

Crucifixion” is a distinctly African-American retelling of Jesus’s execution. It focuses on the tragic suffering of Jesus rather than the miracle of his resurrection. The repetition of phrases like “The Hammer! Hammer!” and “Crucify him! Crucify him!” echo the brutality with which the Black body was treated in the 1920s (42-43). Johnson frames “Lamb-like Jesus” as a victim of undeserved punishment at the hand of “them” to mirror the victimization of his own people as he knew them. “Oh, look how they done my Jesus,” enjoins audience members to participate in witnessing the violent tragedy that made Jesus’s story relevant to many African-Americans, “they” being both the Romans and white people of the modern world.

Johnson’s poems straddle the tensions between embodied preaching and written sermons by constructing a tropological Black God that aligns with Johnson’s racialized worldview. Johnson’s poems seek to re-present the true sentiments of the Negro church and its African-American congregants as he knows them. At the same time, as an African-American writer struggling to fit his art into a literary mold circumscribed by Eurocentric notions of aesthetics and form, Johnson is burdened with the task of translating (or rather, transforming) the low-art medium of preaching to the high-art form of poetry. As such, Johnson includes rather detailed performance notes in his preface to *God’s Trombones*, intending it to be performed (or “intonated,” to use his phrasing) as an embodied rhetoric of Negro respectability (7). The close relationship between African-American literary forms and theological rhetoric that occurs throughout his book of verse provides further insight into the nature of African-American rhetorical practices and

language use itself as a motive (Burke, *Rhetoric* vi).⁶⁰ The Black God trope allows Johnson to focus on emphasizing moral lessons, and the emotional range of the African-American experience, without forcing him to attempt its full range of subject matter and stock material to prove its value to artistic form. Thus, he uses high art both to promote racial uplift and to support Black Nationalism.

Implications

As illustrated in Johnson's *God's Trombones*, this dissertation argues tropological language about God and other religious figures operates as a form of rhetorical resistance within African-American discourses. The Black God trope describes the cyclical relationship between African-Americans' cultural worldview and language as the primary vehicles for producing a material culture (Gordon 3). This dissertation recognizes that over time a discourse developed among Africans in America that held the race together as a unified group through its particular use of the English language. More than simple slang, dialect, or Ebonics, this discourse has been the repository of a culture that stands in direct opposition to white western normativity, because it is designed to be in-group discourse even when spoken outside the community. This is often done in direct response to notions of inferiority reinforced into the collective African-American psyche by whites who seek to justify their sole rule of the United States with inferiority myths like "The Curse of Ham." The idea of a Black God and a Black Jesus are only two examples of counter-folklore myths that seek to refute theories of Black inferiority, but they provide

⁶⁰ Burke notes that, "Such an approach also involves the tentative belief that, even when men use language trivially, the motives inherent in its possible thorough use are acting somewhat as goads, however vague" (iv).

fruitful examples of Black church lore as a rhetoric of resistance. In this dissertation, the work being done by the Black God trope is the creation of alternative visions of reality – a key survival practice that African-Americans learned over time as a coping strategy for slavery and social oppression. This alternative vision requires the paired use of the terms “ethos” and “worldview.” The terms denote culture’s role in the ordering and activity of American intellectual, social, political, and economic life. Echoing Clifford Geertz, a dynamic relationship exists between “ethos” and “worldview” that shows that religion, language, writing, and culture are symbol systems that humans use to create experience. To that extent, in the enthymematic discourses of the Black God trope, symbol systems are the information sources that give our lives “shape, direction, particularity, and point to an ongoing flow of activity” (250).

Further research into the Black God trope in the African-American oral and literary tradition broadens our understanding of how rhetoric is used to manufacture meaning within a discreet, historically marginalized, discursive formation that fluidly switches between Standard American English and its own idiomatic conventions. The flexible use of metaphoric language is not regulated to African-Americans, all English language users engage in the tropological use of metaphor to negotiate communication and persuasion. The Black God trope is, however, a method for isolating the phenomena and tracking its course across time, geography, and genres through its shifting uses by members of a marginalized group. The Black vernacular tradition is riddled with other equally intriguing examples, such as Hip-Hop poetics, Jazz, and comedy, but the Black God trope highlights a continuity across eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religious

rhetoric and the more secularized discourses of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Examining African-American rhetorical strategies in this manner aids in the teaching of writing, reading, and information fluency skills in the classroom (Onwuegbuzie 45). Following Clarence Smith's example, it is time to rethink vernacular language use in English education, teaching about vernacular uses of English as a gateway to, or bridge between, Standardized English (Hollie 34). A large body of research supports the integration of home languages into the English curriculum rather than eliminating them in order to support student learning and development (Palacas 345-347). Similarly, scholars interested in researching African-American history or scholarship in African-American literature are aided by the Black God trope. Rather than viewing religion as arcane and superficial appendage to the study of the African-American experience and its cultural arts, the Black God trope centralizes religion as a vital rhetorical act within both.

This dissertation is a study of how religious syncretism works within African-American rhetorical acts. African-American religious syncretism shows a proclivity for the acceptance, and presence, of a diversity endemic to culture. Cultural literacy that understands that this syncretism functions as a major component of African-American discourse is paramount to understanding and teaching it. It helps educators and students become better rhetorical listeners of African-American culture. It is impossible to deny the importance of Christian contents and the use of Biblical language and motifs in African-American rhetoric, literature, and exegesis. The next step is to recognize their importance to the way many African-Americans communicate their ideas. My phrasing is not meant to be totalizing, to be sure, not all African-Americans use God talk to

communicate or understand all its phrasings as meta-talk. But the influence of God, Jesus, and Biblical language as frames of reference for African-American discourse is unquestionable, given the Protestant influence on a majority of the Black culture in America. It is important, however, to historically contextualize the religious views of the rhetors and their intended audiences when speaking of the use of the Judaic-Christian-Islamic legacy of Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran. In the secular texts examined here, the question is not whether God is or is not used as a point of spiritual reference, but rather whose God is being discussed? In the examples provided, the rhetorical construction of God is a vehicle for a public discussion of race and humanism. They all use language about God to speak publicly from an African-American perspective. The use of religious rhetoric to create a history of public discourse is a composing tradition that begs future examination.

Black Nationalist conversations about God and/or religion are usually also conversations about the material aims of African-American people as a social-political bloc. This discourse, when found in a Black Nationalist context, most often evokes a message that runs explicitly counter-culture to the white western aesthetic that undergirds the cultural logic of white American Nationalism. An examination of how Black Nationalism operates as rhetoric in African-American writing demonstrates that language about God and/or religion is often a resistance strategy that tells a deeper story of African-American history and the discursive logic that that history still attempts to redress. Here, Blackness and religious rhetoric act as not only *logos* (the logic of a communication act), but just importantly as, *ethos* (the material artifact and

representation of a communication act), and *pathos* (the emotional appeal of a persuasive act to a presumed audience). As such, Blackness becomes a shifting worldview that is materially constructed and expressed through the cultural practice of writing as discursive resistance.

The Black God trope highlights the relationship between Black Nationalist religious rhetoric and African-American literature, both broadly and narrowly conceived. I apply the trope to two jeremiads, a catechism, three novels, and three poems to demonstrate its applicability. My research views the Black God trope as a counter-myth making strategy used as resistance that has been a key feature in the rhetoric of African-Americans. Counter-myths featuring the Black God trope help create African-American group identity as much as did slavery and white racism. Throughout the history of African-American letters, authors have molded God and Jesus into a myriad of rhetorical and literary figures that have both influenced, and been influenced by, the culture they are a part of. Each iteration of the Black God trope, in its own way, addresses a necessity of the age in which it was created. A salient feature of the Black God trope is that it derives temporal specificity using timeless images. This dissertation is concerned with “how one’s internal conceptions come to be. And in turn, how our internal understandings influence our interactions with the world” (S. Jones). Matthew Johnson surmises the trajectory of the work laid forth:

A focus on similarities to white evangelical expression bypasses the context in which African American appropriated the Christian message and what the African American brought to the table in terms of her own subjectivity and experience of selfhood. Her subjectivity was constituted within the matrix of powerful social, psychological, and cultural forces, mediated through daily experience that

threatened to rip, shred, flay, or otherwise tear her apart. What the gospel became in African American Christian consciousness was *determined by what it signified, the way it signified, and the particular needs for signification* that drove the African American quest for wholeness. (3, emphasis added).

Understanding how and why God is rhetorically Black helps scholars better understand African-American resistance to white hegemony in the United States. The uses of the trope seen across this dissertation display a common thread of Black Nationalism in their 1) resistance to dominant discourses of protestant Christianity, especially as they relate to race and gender subjectivity, 2) resistance to the social structure supplied by religious discourse, in particular the hierarchical language of “select” and “chosen” people, and 3) resistance to racist and socially exclusionary rhetoric. What this dissertation demonstrates is that various strategies of resistance exist within the use of the Black God trope and that the phenomenon is not isolated to the Christian/Islam binary presented here. What is presented here is illustrative but not exhaustive. This research is a beginning that adds to scholarship in African-American studies and religious rhetoric by extending the discussion of Black American Christianity and Islam beyond the key players, showing the diversity in African-American thought. Lastly, this dissertation broadens the scholarly understanding of Black Islam, the African-American church, the womanist novel, and Black religious rhetoric as both written discourse and embodiment.

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